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**‘Better Together’: A grounded theory study  
of social worker decision making in cases  
involving sexual behaviour between  
siblings**

**Peter Yates**



# **Declaration**

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Peter Yates

31<sup>st</sup> May 2015

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## **Abstract**

Between 1/5 and 1/3 of all cases of sexual abuse in the UK involve children or young people as perpetrators (Hackett, 2004). Siblings may account for somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 of the victims of these children (Hackett et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2000; Beckett, 2006; Allardyce and Yates, 2009; Ryan, 2010a). There is increasing evidence that sibling sexual abuse may have very damaging consequences for victims, at least as damaging as sexual abuse by a parent (Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr et al., 2002), yet there is ongoing debate over how to differentiate harmless sex play from harmful sibling sexual abuse (Caffaro, 2014). How social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour is of interest in light of their role in making decisions regarding the intervention of the State in private and family life. However, research on how social workers make decisions has so far been limited to situations concerning abuse by a parent, with almost no attention having been paid to situations where a child in the family is the source of risk.

This grounded theory study analyses the retrospective accounts of decisions made with respect to separation, contact, and reunification by 21 social workers in Scotland regarding 21 families in which sibling sexual behaviour has taken place. The study finds that social workers make these decisions intuitively and in relationship with children and families, influenced by a cognitive orientation, a practice mindset: ‘siblings as better together’. This mindset comprises three underlying perspectives: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective. These perspectives encourage a focus on immediate safety rather than emotional harm, and could be said to extend Dingwall et al.’s (1983) ‘rule of optimism’ in these cases where a child is the source of abuse within the family. In keeping with the findings of serious case reviews concerning abuse by a parent (e.g. Sinclair and Bullock, 2002; Brandon et al., 2012), there is a danger of the victim child becoming lost.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the study**

My interest in sexual behaviour between siblings was prompted by prior employment as a social worker with a specialist voluntary sector service working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour. As well as having a role to conduct assessments of risk and to undertake therapeutic work with children and families to address and reduce those risks, I also provided training and consultancy to local authority social workers and other professional groups who encountered children with harmful sexual behaviour as part their work. Demand for the service was high.

Children account for a significant proportion of perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Hackett (2004) estimates from criminal statistics (Home Office, 2002) and social work child protection data (Glasgow et al., 1994) that between 1/5 and 1/3 of all cases of sexual abuse in the UK involve children or young people as perpetrators. A general population survey involving over 6000 participants by Radford et al. (2011) found that nearly 66% of the contact sexual abuse reported by children involved perpetrators under the age of 18. Where children have been subject to sexual abuse, it is often at the hands of other children.

In Hutton and Whyte’s (2006) study of 189 children in Scotland referred to specialist services for children who display harmful sexual behaviour, 94% were boys. Ryan (2010b) similarly reports a number of studies in the range 91-93%. These figures may somewhat overstate the ratio of boys to girls in that girls tend to be referred for services as victims rather than as perpetrators when displaying similar harmful sexual behaviour (Robinson, 2005). Contrary to my expectations, most of the cases I worked with involved boys who had sexually abused a sibling. I should not have been so surprised. While estimates vary depending on the source of information, siblings may account for somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 of the victims of children under the age of 18 who have sexually abused another child (Hackett et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2000; Beckett, 2006; Allardyce and Yates, 2009; Ryan, 2010b). Sibling sexual abuse is thought to be the most common form of intra-familial sexual abuse

(Krienert and Walsh, 2011), Stroebel et al. (2013b) finding more than three times as many respondents to have experienced sibling incest compared with parent-child incest in their anonymous computer-assisted interviews of 1,521 women. Sibling sexual abuse is an area of legitimate concern.

I found working with these cases more difficult than those in which a child had sexually abused another child outwith the family. While this was not because of the inherently more problematic nature of these families, the literature suggests that these families present particular challenges. A small number of studies have compared the background characteristics of boys who have sexually abused siblings with boys who have abused children outwith the family (O'Brien, 1991; Worling, 1995; Tidefors et al., 2010; Latzman et al., 2011; Yates et al., 2012). These studies are based on clinical samples, and all found significantly higher rates of sexual abuse experienced by the group of boys who had abused siblings. Latzman et al.'s (2011) study of 166 boys referred for residential treatment found that 58% of sibling offenders had been sexually abused, compared with 35% of non-sibling offenders. Similar figures are provided by the other studies in which boys had been referred for treatment in the community. Two smaller studies (Worling, 1995; Tidefors et al., 2010), although not Latzman et al. (2011), found sibling offenders to have experienced higher levels of family dysfunction including more marital discord, parental rejection and physical discipline. Latzman et al. (2011) did not use such sophisticated measures of family dysfunction, but they did find that sibling offenders were more likely to have witnessed domestic violence (58% versus 20%) and to have been exposed to pornography (58% versus 24%). O'Brien's (1991) study of 170 adolescent sex offenders found that the mothers of the boys who had abused siblings were more likely to have been sexually abused than those of the boys who had abused non-sibling children (36% versus 9%). All of these statistics accord with my experiences of working with the families of boys who had sexually abused their siblings, but this was not why I found these cases so challenging.

What I found difficult and often contentious were the decisions to be made. By the time boys were referred to the service for which I worked, decisions had usually been taken by local authority social workers regarding whether or not the siblings could remain living together following the sibling sexual abuse coming to light. What I then found problematic were the decisions about whether the siblings could have contact with each other, and whether and when siblings could return to live together. Not only was it not straightforward to reach a view in individual cases about the best course of action, but the decisions social workers made often conflicted with my recommendations. It was especially puzzling that the views social workers expressed in training sessions differed from the decisions they made in practice. In training, social workers typically said that they would be very reluctant for a child to return to live with a sibling they had previously sexually abused. I would set out a process based on Thomas and Viar’s (2005) model of family reunification whereby I believed that siblings returning to live together could be achievable. In practice, however, social workers seemed only too keen for siblings to have contact with each other and to return to live together, even when I advised against it.

One of the difficulties in negotiating these debates is that there is no evidence base on which to make the decisions. No research has yet been done to explore how families fare when a child returns home to live with a sibling they have sexually abused. I am aware of only one study of five families’ experiences following the reunification of a parent with the child they had sexually abused (Matthews et al., 1991). This study found that the main concern for the professionals consulted was that the sexual abuse did not recur. Only two victims felt that their views were taken into account in the decision making, and the actual threat of repeated abuse seemed to be less of an issue for the victims than the emotional pain that many continued to endure. It was partly on this basis that I advised a careful and staged process of reunification along the lines of Thomas and Viar’s (2005) model. My initial proposal for doctoral research was to conduct a study of family reunification following sibling sexual abuse similar to Matthews et al.’s (1991) study in order to begin to establish an evidence base for reunification decisions.

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There were two reasons why I decided against such a study. I felt strongly that I wanted my research to be of practical benefit. Early in the first year of the doctoral programme I conducted a focus group with five specialist child sexual abuse practitioners recruited from two agencies, with which I had maintained professional links, in order to explore ideas for research that the practitioners would find valuable in their work. Having stated that I was planning to undertake research in the area of sibling sexual abuse, I asked a broad question about the practitioners’ experiences of working with these cases in order to prompt discussion. It emerged that my experiences of reunification decision making were not unique. Other practitioners also found these decisions difficult and reported coming into conflict with local authority social workers for reasons they found hard to fathom. The views expressed were that social workers tended to minimise the seriousness and potential impact of the sibling sexual abuse, and that in amongst the debates social workers often appeared to take sides with the parents, usually the mothers, who wanted their families to be reunited. The idea emerged to try to understand from the social workers’ point of view how they make decisions in these cases. A study of families’ experiences remained a valuable option, but was ruled out due to the enormous difficulty Matthews et al. (1991) found in trying to recruit families to participate. This could make such a study problematic for time-limited doctoral research.

I therefore decided to study how social workers make decisions regarding contact and reunification in cases involving sibling sexual abuse, within which I would be able to explore how the social workers made sense of the sibling sexual behaviour and the reasons for the siblings having initially been separated. Recruiting social workers to participate in the study proved very difficult, and I extended the sample to include cases where siblings had remained living together. The study therefore broadened to include separation as well as contact and reunification decision making.

I will go on to provide a summary of the rationale for the study and why it is a valuable piece of research. I am aware, however, that I have already used an array of terms which require clarification before proceeding.



## 1.2 Terminology

### 1.2.1 Siblings

For the purposes of delineating relationships which would legally be regarded as incestuous, The Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act (1995b) defines siblings as full or half siblings, that is having one or both birth parents in common. The general literature on siblings, however, reflects a much broader range of relationships that can be regarded as siblings. Elgar and Head (1999) unpack the concept of the sibling relationship in the context of changing family configurations and argue that these relationships may be underpinned by shared genes, a common history, or legal status. Full siblings share genes and legal status, but may not have been brought up together and so may not share a common history, family culture, and values. Adopted siblings do not share genes, but legally are siblings and may to greater and lesser extents share a common family history. Elgar and Head (1999) list full, half, step, foster, and adopted siblings among the possible types of sibling relationships, and Settlemire (2011), borrowing from the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), adds the concept of “fictive kin”: children who are not related biologically or legally but who have been brought up together or in close proximity and share an enduring bond. This may include next-door neighbours, or close friends living together in a group home. Sanders (2004) refers to these relationships as “social siblings”.

The psychology literature on sibling sexual behaviour reflects these complexities of relationships with inconsistent definitions of siblings across studies. Some authors do not define their use of the term ‘sibling’ at all. Johnson et al. (2009), for example, surveyed 500 mental health and child welfare practitioners about their views on the maximum ages at which it would be acceptable for siblings to engage in a range of family practices (including bathing together, hugging, kissing, and sharing a bed), without defining the term ‘sibling’. Others define siblings as full or half siblings (e.g. Loreda, 1982; Smith and Israel, 1987); as full, half, step, adopted or foster siblings (e.g. Worling, 1995); and still others, such as Bass et al. (2006), include social siblings. It is not clear whether sexual behaviours displayed within these different

kinds of sibling relationships are met with the same level of concern or disapproval, and it is necessary to be alert to the different definitions when comparing studies. I will not continually indicate the authors’ definition of ‘sibling’ unless it is necessary to do so, and will otherwise refer to siblings as full or half siblings.

### **1.2.2 Children’s harmful sexual behaviour**

Hackett (2004; 2014) provides an overview of the different language used to describe children who have sexually abused other children and the advantages and disadvantages of different terminology. On the one hand there is a desire to avoid stigmatising language which equates children with adult sex offenders; on the other there is a desire to avoid understating the seriousness and potential impact of the behaviour on victims. Children may not have been charged and convicted of an offence, and so may not be ‘offenders’. Some sexual behaviours may cause harm but not involve victimisation. Hackett (2004; 2014) makes the case for referring to ‘harmful sexual behaviours’, and ‘children with harmful sexual behaviours’ as useful umbrella terms. I will also use these terms, but will use other authors’ language when referring to their studies unless it is unhelpful or confusing to do so.

There are also sexual behaviours that take place between children, which are harmless and developmentally expected. One of the issues I was interested to explore was how social workers differentiated harmless from harmful sexual behaviour between siblings. I therefore used the neutral terms ‘sibling sexual behaviour’ and ‘sexual behaviour between siblings’ to refer to the whole spectrum of possible sibling sexual behaviours, leaving it up to the social workers to define the behaviour more precisely. ‘Sibling incest’ is a term used in different ways by different authors. For some it means the same as my use of the term ‘sibling sexual behaviour’; for others it means ‘sibling sexual abuse’. Again I will use the terms used by the authors, but where their meaning is unclear I will be precise in deploying ‘sibling incest’ in the same way as ‘sibling sexual behaviour’ to refer to the whole panoply of possible sibling sexual behaviours, arguably the most prevalent understanding of the term

(Brennan, 2006). I will reserve ‘sibling sexual abuse’ for behaviour which is judged to have been abusive.

### **1.2.3 ‘Perpetrator’ and ‘Victim’**

Some sibling sexual behaviour may be harmless and developmentally expected, and some may fall outwith developmental norms and cause harm, but be mutually initiated under conditions of a balance of power between the siblings (Johnson, 1991; 2003). Other sibling sexual behaviour is initiated or instigated by one of the siblings with the potential for developmental damage to the other, where there is an imbalance of power in the relationship. In this latter scenario, one sibling could be said to occupy the role of ‘perpetrator’, and the other of ‘victim’. I am personally uncomfortable with the terms ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ to refer to the different roles the siblings play in the sibling sexual behaviour. The term ‘perpetrator’ strikes me as having rather adult and stigmatising connotations. One of the social workers in this study similarly did not want the boy she discussed to be regarded as a ‘perpetrator’. However, constantly referring to ‘the child who initiated or instigated the harmful sexual behaviour’ is not practicable either, and I have not found a satisfactory alternative. I will therefore continue to use the terms ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ to refer to the roles the siblings play in sibling sexual behaviour which is not mutually initiated, on the understanding that ‘to perpetrate’ is taken in a non-judgemental sense to mean “to perform or be responsible for” (Collins Concise Dictionary, 1999:1102).

### **1.2.4 Separation, contact and reunification**

In this study I have focused on three areas of decision making: separation, contact and reunification. I will use the term ‘separation’ to refer to removing a child from their family or foster home which they have shared with their sibling(s), or to refer to stopping direct face-to-face contact with their sibling as a result of the sibling sexual behaviour. Where it is necessary to make a distinction I will refer to ‘removal’ or ‘stopping contact’ as appropriate.

If not living together, siblings may maintain a relationship with each other via telephone, letter, or face-to-face (Rutter, 2004), via relatives, text, or social media. ‘Contact’, unless otherwise specified, will refer to direct face-to-face contact as this is the way in which the social workers have generally used the term. Contact may be supervised by social work staff, or unsupervised, that is to say not supervised by social work staff.

Thomas and Viar (2005) regard family reunification as a process. Having been separated and contact stopped, siblings may be reintroduced to each other via some form of contact in order to attempt a process of reconciliation, which may or may not eventually lead to the siblings returning to live together. Carnochan et al. (2013) similarly regard reunification as a continuum of outcomes ranging from letter or telephone contact, through periodic face-to-face contact, to returning to live together. I will adopt this meaning of the term ‘reunification’, a coming back together again, when referring to reunification decision making in this study, specifying whether this entails re-establishing contact or returning to live together as and when necessary. Most authors, however, tend to use the term ‘reunification’ more narrowly to mean children returning home from care. Where an author’s meaning is ambiguous I will clarify it. I will clarify other terms when necessary as I describe the study.

### **1.3 The value of the study**

A review of the literature on sibling sexual behaviour highlights a long-standing and ongoing debate about the harm this behaviour may cause, and a lack of consensus over how to differentiate harmless sibling sex play from harmful sibling sexual abuse. There is growing evidence that sibling sexual abuse can have extremely damaging consequences for victims, at least as damaging as abuse by a parent (Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr et al., 2002). Leaving siblings together under those circumstances could be very unsafe for the victim. However, sibling sexual behaviour may not always be very harmful, and separating a child from their parents and siblings is not a decision to be taken lightly. It is well understood that separating children from their families can have highly detrimental consequences.

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Fahlberg (1991) suggests that these consequences are mediated through a number of factors, such as the age and stage of development of the child, their attachment to the parent, and their cognitive ability to make sense of the separation. As Winnicott (1986) observes, however:

[T]he pain of separation from those we love is for all of us a devastating experience, but for a dependent child the whole of his or her world collapses and everything loses meaning. (Winnicott, 1986:39)

Social workers need to balance the risks of unwarranted intervention against the risks of failing to intervene (Stokes and Taylor, 2014).

While the legal context establishes the concept of ‘serious’ or ‘significant’ harm as pivotal for the justification for social work involvement in the private lives of families, the lack of consensus over the impact of sibling sexual behaviour means it does not provide unequivocal justification for social work intervention in family life. What constitutes abuse in practice, including sibling sexual abuse, is closely related to the decisions that are taken about whether or not the State should intervene in private and family life (Department of Health, 1995). Social workers are key decision makers in such matters, their recommendations often accepted routinely by other professionals involved in the decision making process (Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Wade et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2012). How social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour, and their judgements about the level of involvement required in cases involving such behaviour are therefore of particular interest.

Estimates of the prevalence of sibling sexual behaviour vary considerably from 2% (Russell, 1986) to 4.7% (Griffie et al., 2014), 6.5% (Atwood, 2007), 7.4% (Hardy, 2001) and 13% (Finkelhor, 1980). Figures vary according to how narrowly ‘siblings’ and ‘sibling sexual behaviour’ are defined, as well as the sampling strategy and methods of data collection. Most studies survey students at University, and Griffie et al. (2014) caution that they may under-estimate prevalence within the general population. Social workers are likely to encounter cases involving sibling sexual behaviour at some stage. Given the potentially serious consequences for the children

of the decisions social workers make, how they make these decisions is an important subject of study.

A review of the literature on social worker decision making reveals concerns about its personal nature, yet most studies have focused on case characteristics rather than the thinking processes of social workers themselves (Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008; Stokes and Schmidt, 2012; Hackett and Taylor, 2014). Almost without exception, studies of social worker decision making have been in respect of situations involving concerns about the abuse of a child by a parent, with some attention having been paid to the ‘difficult’ behaviour of adolescents. Very little has been written about decision making in circumstances where a child is the source of risk or abuse to another child within the family, despite more than 50% of children and adolescents in the National Family Violence Survey in the United States being reported as having acted towards a sibling with severe violence (Straus and Gelles, 1990). Sibling abuse in its various forms is arguably the most common form of family violence (Meyers, 2014; Tucker et al., 2014). This study, which explores from their perspective how social workers make decisions in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, addresses a significant gap in the literature.

## **1.4 The structure of the thesis**

The thesis follows a straightforward structure. It starts with a narrative review of the literature, and situates social worker decision making in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour in a historical and legal context. It outlines the current state of research regarding sibling sexual behaviour, and social worker decision making with respect to separation, contact and reunification. The thesis moves on to discuss the methodology for the research, explaining the decision to adopt a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The research is designed to achieve two broad aims: to establish the Scottish policy context for this area of social work practice; and to understand from their perspective how social workers in Scotland make decisions regarding separation, contact and reunification in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. The findings regarding the policy context are

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presented alongside a discussion of uncertainty, identified by the social workers as presenting particular challenges in these cases. The thesis gives a brief outline of the model of social worker decision making that I have developed from my analysis of the data generated by the study, before setting out this tripartite model in three separate but interrelated chapters. The model is re-integrated in a discussion of the findings, followed by a summary of the limitations of the study and concluding with recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.





## **Chapter 2: A review of the literatures**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In addressing the subject of social worker decision making regarding whether or not siblings may live together, have contact, or return to live together again following an incident or incidents of sibling sexual behaviour, there are a number of areas of relevant literature, which only rarely make connections with each other. It may therefore be fitting to refer to ‘literatures’ in the plural. Rather than attempting a systematic review, I will provide a narrative overview of these relevant literatures in order to locate the context and value of this study.

### **2.2 The historical context: Sexual behaviour between siblings as a subject of public concern**

Cree (1995) traces concerns about parent-child incest to the nineteenth century in her discussion of the formation in 1885 of the National Vigilance Association.

Children’s sexual behaviour towards other unrelated children also raised alarm, but children’s sibling sexual behaviour is not mentioned explicitly in Cree’s discussion.

This is not to say that it was not of any concern. Presented as isolated cases of individual psychopathy, Krafft-Ebing (1914) provides two examples from the late nineteenth century of sexual behaviours between a brother and sister, and a small handful of studies were published from the 1940s onwards concerning children’s harmful sexual behaviour towards other children (Shoor et al., 1966), in which examples of sibling sexual behaviour are given (e.g. MacLay, 1960). Hacking (1991) argues, however, that the ground was prepared for sibling sexual behaviour being a subject of particular concern by the growing discourse on child abuse since the 1960s. He maintains that the concept of child abuse emerged following the publication of Kempe et al.’s (1962) article on the “battered child syndrome”. This led to a conceptualisation of child abuse as the behaviour of deviant individuals rather than as a social problem, and therefore the idea of a ‘child abuser’ as a ‘kind of person’. Hacking (1992) introduced the notion of ‘human kinds’, and while he has since abandoned the term (Hacking, 2007), it has been used by other writers such as

Berreby (2005) to refer to the idea that we convince ourselves that we belong to different classes and categories of people. As a particular ‘kind of person’, child abusers could be seen as different from other adults and parents. Once the idea had been established that a particular kind of parent could batter their children, it was possible to consider that a kind of parent might sexually abuse their children.

Hacking (1991) argues that by couching incest under the umbrella of child abuse, a language was provided within which the subject could be raised more easily. Being able to talk about incest allowed sibling incest to be discussed, which Hacking considered at the time to be “the next hinterland” (Hacking, 1991:277).

Hacking (1991; 1992) suggests that alongside these developments, women, as the primary victims of abuse as children, were more able to talk about their experiences as they achieved greater equality. Having been able to talk about their experiences at the hands of men, and specifically fathers, women were more able to discuss their experiences at the hands of older brothers. Bell (1993) takes this further and argues that incestuous abuse reveals the gendered power dynamics of our society. Rather than being something abnormal, restricted to particular kinds of people and kinds of families, Bell (1993) maintains that incest as a form of sexual abuse is in fact widespread, a social problem, to be understood within the context of a society in which men are able to exercise power over women and children in a sexualised way.

An alternative account is that child abuse as a concept has arisen as a means of further increasing State power and control over ‘deviant families’ (Hacking, 1992). Drawing heavily on Donzelot (1980), Hacking (1991) argues that the concept of child abuse has not only supported the protection of children from maltreatment, but has also allowed the State to intervene in the private lives of families and to exercise control in ways that were not previously possible. This echoes Foucault’s (1976; 1979) ideas of the disciplinary society obtaining power as cheaply as possible, with as little visibility and resistance as possible, and extending power as far as possible, through the emergence of the professions, or the disciplines, of medicine, psychology, and social work (Foucault, 1976; 1979; Rabinow, 1984; Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). The discourse on child abuse from the 1960s onwards could

therefore be seen as part of a longer trend of concern about abuse and increasing State intervention in the private lives of families. Thresholds for State intervention have lowered throughout this period (Department of Health, 1995), with definitions for what is considered abusive to children encompassing an ever wider range of behaviours. A concern with child sibling incest as a form of child abuse would arguably allow the State to penetrate the private lives of families even further. As I will discuss below, this widening of what is considered harmful and abusive applies to sibling sexual behaviour as much as for child abuse generally.

There are three strands of argument here. One position is that sexual abuse committed by both fathers and brothers is harmful, widespread, and indicative of society’s gendered power relations. A second position is that sexual abuse, while harmful, is committed by deviant kinds of individuals who need to be treated, rather than it being a wider social problem. A third position appears critical of the idea of sibling sexual behaviour always being harmful, with changing definitions of sibling sexual abuse being a manifestation of the increasing intrusion of the State into the private lives of families. Hacking (1992) concludes that neither the reality nor the construction of child abuse should be doubted; however the question remains as to whether sibling sexual behaviour now regarded as abuse is always harmful, or whether it is something that we now just think of as harmful, and is experienced as harmful, because those are the terms under which it is discussed.

## **2.3 Changing definitions: Sibling incest and sibling sexual abuse**

Definitions of sibling sexual abuse are gradually widening, and there is often a conflation of the terms ‘sibling incest’ and ‘sibling sexual abuse’ in the psychology literature. Some authors define sibling incest purely in terms of sexual contact between siblings (e.g. Justice and Justice, 1979; Loredano, 1982; Becker et al., 1986; Gilbert, 1989; Griffie et al., 2014). Others include notions of power and coercion (e.g. Carlson et al., 2006), and Bass et al. (2006) use ‘sibling incest’ and ‘sibling sexual abuse’ interchangeably, defining it as sibling sexual behaviour which causes

harm in the form of anger, sadness or fear. This re-definition of sibling incest to describe behaviour that is always abusive reflects growing evidence that sibling sexual behaviour is often harmful, taking place within the context of power imbalances and a lack of consent.

Sexual behaviour between siblings is not always harmful, however, let alone abusive. Johnson (1991; 2003) and Araj (2004), for example, differentiate harmless sex play between young children, from sexual behaviour falling outwith developmental norms that is therefore harmful, and from sexual behaviour that is harmful and abusive. From her own extensive clinical experience, Johnson (1991) observes that young siblings who engage in extensive, mutually initiated sexual behaviour come to rely on sexual behaviour as a way of coping and can become focused on sexuality to the exclusion of the pursuit of other important developmental tasks. Johnson (2003) is clear that sexual behaviour between siblings that goes beyond harmless sex play, whether or not mutually initiated, can be very harmful for the children involved.

As I outlined in the Introduction, I will deploy the terms used by the authors of the studies, but where there is doubt about an author’s meaning I will maintain a distinction between ‘sibling incest’ as a broad term, and ‘sibling sexual abuse’ to refer to behaviour judged as abusive. Otherwise I will use the neutral and general term ‘sibling sexual behaviour’.

### **2.3.1 Differentiating harmful from harmless sibling sexual behaviour**

Classifying sibling sexual behaviour as falling outwith developmental norms is somewhat compromised by a lack of definitive understanding of what is normal. Studies of what constitutes normal childhood sexual behaviour tend to rely on retrospective reports by adults (e.g. Larsson and Svedin, 2002; Johnson and Mitra, 2007) or reports by parents and adults of what they observe (e.g. Friedrich et al., 1998). Johnson (2010) nonetheless outlines the parameters of harmless sex play between children under the age of 12, describing an exploratory, information gathering process between children of similar age, size, and developmental status,

where the behaviour is entered into voluntarily by the children involved, with a light-hearted and playful quality which diminishes if instructed to stop by an adult. This behaviour would be balanced by a curiosity to explore all sorts of other things in the child’s world. The extent to which behaviour does not accord with this description would raise corresponding concerns. Beyond this, typical indicators of sexual behaviour between children that may be abusive include large age gaps between the children, use of threats or force, other forms of coercion such as bribes, trickery and manipulation, or significant power imbalances such as due to size, strength, intellectual ability, or a position of authority (e.g. Calder, 1999; Araj, 2004; Johnson, 2010; Caffaro, 2014). While these criteria have been used for children generally, there is growing evidence that they may not be entirely applicable to siblings.

In the 1970s and 1980s, while sibling sexual behaviour received divided responses of approval and disapproval from adults, it was generally regarded as a benign aspect of normal sexual play and exploration, as potentially a positive experience, and certainly less harmful than parent-child incest (Finkelhor, 1980; Adler and Schutz, 1995). Only where there were large age gaps between the siblings or obvious use of force was the behaviour regarded as abusive, and even then it was not considered to be very harmful. In his study of 796 college undergraduate students in New England, Finkelhor (1980) differentiates exploratory from exploitative sexual behaviour between siblings according to whether force or threats were used, or whether there was a five-year age gap between the siblings. The reason for this age gap being chosen is unspecified (Alpert, 1997), but Finkelhor (1980) found that the larger the age gap, the more likely it was for the behaviour to be reported as a negative experience by the victim. In a survey of 526 undergraduate students, of whom 86 students had reported a pre-adolescent sibling sexual experience, Greenwald and Leitenberg (1989) found no long-term effects on sexual adjustment where the age gap between the children had been less than five years, although concede that this would not preclude the possibility of other harmful effects. A five-year age gap or use of force have similarly been used to differentiate harmless from abusive sibling

sexual behaviour by other authors (e.g. De Jong, 1989; Carter and Dalen, 1998). Since then Carlson et al. (2006) have observed that authors have used age gaps between two and five years to differentiate abusive from harmless sibling sexual behaviour. These narrow criteria have since been challenged, and Finkelhor’s influential study in particular has been regarded as contributing to a widely-held view that sibling sexual behaviour is usually harmless (Sanders, 2004).

Russell (1986) argues that sibling relationships are characterised by dependency and power imbalances, where even a one-year age difference has enormous power implications. Of 25 brothers who had sexually abused their sisters, Russell (1986) reports that 10 brothers were less than five years older than their sister. In a study of 43 adolescents charged with sexual offences regarded as incestuous (most, but not all of which involved siblings) Pierce and Pierce (1990) found that in 22% of the cases the offender was younger than the victim. Phillips-Green (2002) argues that a brother close in age may be able to coerce a sister into sexual behaviour, especially in the context of a traditional or patriarchal family where males are accorded greater power. An American study by Krienert and Walsh (2011) examined 13,013 incidents of sibling sexual offences involving the use of force recorded by the National Incident-based Reporting System from 2000-2007. Given the number of incidents between siblings with only small age gaps they conclude that age gaps should no longer be included as part of any definitions of sibling sexual abuse.

Cyr et al. (2002) argue similarly that use of force and a five-year age gap should not be used as criteria to differentiate normal from abusive sibling sexual behaviour. In their comparative study of 72 girls, who had experienced substantiated sexual abuse (otherwise not defined) by brothers, fathers and step-fathers, they found that force was used in only 30% of cases of abuse perpetrated by a brother, and over half the brothers were less than five years older than their sister. Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (2005:609) conclude that “sometimes incest that appears consensual is actually based on fear”, and that sibling sexual behaviour construed as exploratory may often be better described as abusive.

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While there is general agreement that large age gaps and use of force or coercion would indicate sibling sexual abuse, there is evidence that an absence of force or age disparity should not be taken as an indication that the behaviour was mutually initiated. An examination of the dynamics of the family and sibling relationships may be required to discern whether or not there are significant power imbalances in the sibling relationship (Allardyce and Yates, 2013). As suggested earlier, we can see a gradual widening of the definition of sibling sexual abuse and a justification for penetrating more deeply the private life of the family.

Nonetheless, there remain no universally accepted criteria for differentiating harmful from harmless sibling sexual behaviour (Caffaro, 2014). In addition, the three broad classifications of sibling sexual behaviour identified by Johnson (1991; 2003) and Araji (2004) - harmless sex play between young siblings, harmful mutually initiated sibling sexual behaviour, and harmful abusive sibling sexual behaviour - often become conflated or even confused in the literature. Morrill (2014), for example, defines sibling sexual abuse as:

Sexual behaviour between siblings that is not age appropriate,  
not transitory and not motivated by developmentally  
appropriate curiosity. (Morrill, 2014:206)

There is no mention of age gaps or use of force, but this definition could describe mutually initiated sexual behaviour, and suggests that behaviour could not be considered abusive unless it takes place on more than one occasion. The definitions used in different studies vary considerably, making comparisons across studies problematic. One might anticipate that the confusion in the literature may be mirrored in practice.

### **2.3.2 The impact of sibling sexual abuse**

The belief that sibling sexual abuse is less serious and less harmful than parent-child sexual abuse or sexual abuse by children towards other children in the community has also been challenged. Sibling incest offenders may have more victims than extra-familial offenders and commit more acts over a longer period of time (O'Brien, 1991). Their offending behaviour is more likely to involve anal or vaginal penetration than for either children who abuse in the community or fathers who abuse daughters (O'Brien, 1991; Cyr et al., 2002). Carlson et al.'s (2006) study of 41 adult survivors of sibling incest found that the incest involved a whole range of sexual behaviours, from fondling (94% of the women) to anal intercourse (11.8% of women), and torture (14.7% of women). Hardy (2001) concluded from the literature that sibling sexual abuse had the same psychological and emotional impact on girls as sexual abuse by a father. Several studies have compared the effects of father-daughter and brother-sister sexual abuse and found brother-sister sexual abuse to be at least as harmful (Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr et al., 2002).

However, studies exploring the impact of sibling sexual abuse tend to rely on small, clinical samples, case studies, or the retrospective self-reports of self-selected adults, usually women, often already in therapy. These studies emphasise the harmful impact of sibling sexual abuse. Otherwise, surveys of University students may understate its impact. The studies cannot be taken as generalizable to the wider population, and they usually establish association rather than cause.

In some cases the short-term consequences of sibling sexual abuse have been said to include pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and physical injury (Patton, 1991), symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Sheinberg and Fraenkel, 2001; Kiselica and Morrill-Richards, 2007), and emotional and behavioural problems (Shaw et al., 2000). In the longer-term victims of sibling sexual abuse have been reported to suffer from a whole range of difficulties, including depression or suicidal thoughts (Daie et al., 1989; Wiehe, 1990; Canavan et al., 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Carlson, 2011), dissociation, flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive



thoughts (Daie et al., 1989; Laviola, 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr et al., 2002), low self-esteem (Daie et al., 1989; Canavan et al., 1992; Laviola, 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Carlson, 2011; Morrill, 2014), alcohol and other substance misuse problems (Canavan et al., 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr et al., 2002), eating disorders (Daie et al., 1989; Canavan et al., 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999), and ongoing feelings of guilt and shame (Daie et al., 1989; Kiselica and Morrill-Richards, 2007).

Finkelhor and Berliner (1995) report that up to 40% of children sexually abused by adults may present no immediate symptoms, although many of these children may become more symptomatic over time (Caffaro, 2014). Sheinberg and Fraenkel (2001) similarly comment that while not all victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse will present symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, almost all will suffer what they call ‘relational trauma’. This is supported by findings with respect to victims of sibling sexual abuse. Relationship difficulties throughout life, such as in forming or maintaining meaningful partner relationships, experiencing physical violence within marriage, or having difficulty trusting other people are reported in many studies (e.g. Russell, 1986; Daie et al., 1989; Wiehe, 1990; Laviola, 1992; Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Carlson et al., 2006; Carlson, 2011; Caffaro, 2014). Barbaree and Langton (2006) suggest that even those who regard their sibling sexual experiences as positive may have been affected in ways that they do not realise or understand, and Cole (1982) concludes that sibling sexual behaviour is not benign, even when the age difference is small and when reported as positive. In a study of 203 undergraduate students, Hardy (2001) found that the number of respondents who considered their sibling aggression and sexual experiences to have been abusive increased in retrospect compared with their views at the time. Where sibling sexual abuse is harmful, its effects may not be immediately evident either to the victim or to the observer.

While sibling sexual abuse may have the potential to be enormously harmful and at least as harmful as parent-child sexual abuse, this does not mean that all sibling sexual behaviour is harmful, or that all sibling sexual abuse is extremely harmful.

The number of students reporting sibling sexual experiences in Hardy’s (2001) study was small, and the majority continued to regard their experiences as consensual. A recent American study using anonymised computer-assisted self-interviews of 2,885 participants, mainly undergraduate and graduate college students, recorded 137 participants as reporting sibling sexual experiences (Beard et al., 2013; Stroebel et al., 2013a; Stroebel et al., 2013b; Griffiee et al., 2014; O’Keefe et al., 2014). The study found that ‘victims’ of brother-sister incest had outcomes significantly less problematic than victims of father-daughter incest on some measures (Beard et al., 2013; Stroebel et al., 2013a). However, the authors do not distinguish between behaviour reported as voluntary and behaviour reported as coerced in their findings relating to the impact of the incest. While the authors conclude that brother-sister incest should not be considered equivalent to father-daughter incest in terms of its long-term impact, it does not follow that sibling sexual abuse is necessarily less harmful than sexual abuse by a parent. The study did find, however, that both the ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ of sibling sexual behaviour suffered adverse effects such as depression and hyper-eroticisation when compared with controls who did not report sibling sexual experiences (Beard et al., 2013; Stroebel et al., 2013a; Stroebel et al., 2013b; O’Keefe et al., 2014).

Finkelhor et al. (2007) present a challenge to the view that sibling sexual abuse is always very harmful. They found that poly-victimization is predictive of trauma symptoms, and when taken into account greatly reduces or eliminates the association between individual victimizations and effects. They argue that most studies have failed to obtain complete victimization profiles, and that the effects of poly-victimization may therefore have been mis-attributed to sexual victimization. However, they concede that sexual assaults are rare in their sample and typically occur in conjunction with high levels of poly-victimization. Cyr et al. (2002) also comment that it is difficult to separate the impact of sibling incest from the effects of other problems within the family, and in a small study of 19 women, Rowntree (2007) found that some of the harmful effects of sibling sexual behaviour could be

exacerbated or even explained by negative family and community responses to disclosure. Alternatively, the effects could be mitigated by supportive responses.

To conclude, contrary to the previously widely-held belief that sibling sexual behaviour is generally exploratory and harmless in nature, there is growing evidence that sibling sexual behaviour has the potential to be extremely harmful and abusive. However, it is not possible to say that all sibling sexual behaviour is harmful, or that all sibling sexual abuse is equally damaging. The impact of sibling sexual abuse may not be immediately evident to the victim or to the observer. While it is commonly agreed that large age gaps and use of force or coercion would indicate abusive and harmful sibling sexual behaviour, there are no universally accepted criteria for differentiating harmless and exploratory behaviour from sibling sexual abuse. Social workers making decisions in response to incidents of sibling sexual behaviour have to make sense of whether the behaviour is harmless, mutually initiated, or abusive. Without always having clear and immediate evidence of impact, they may have to make their own judgements as to the extent to which the sexual behaviour is likely to be harmful.

## **2.4 Prevalence**

Establishing the prevalence of sexual behaviour between siblings is far from straightforward. Estimates of the prevalence of sexual behaviour between siblings were given in the Introduction, ranging from 2% (Russell, 1986) to 13% (Finkelhor, 1980). The lower figures are produced by studies which specify a “victim” or some level of coercion, whereas the higher figures allow for what may be more experimental and consensual behaviour. It would appear that a significant minority of children engage in some form of sexual behaviour with their siblings.

Turning to sibling sexual abuse specifically, Hackett (2004:7) describes how “notoriously difficult” it is to obtain accurate and reliable information on the prevalence of sexual abuse, due to its hidden nature, the stigma it carries, and the lack of disclosure due to the silencing of victims, not to mention problems of definition. Physical evidence is usually absent (Falcão et al., 2014) making

substantiation problematic. Ryan (2010a) reports on an American study examining data from a sample of 1600 cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by adolescents taken from the Uniform Data Collection System of the National Adolescent Perpetration Network. The majority of the adolescents were referred for a first offence, yet the average number of victims was seven, suggesting many unreported cases. There is a wealth of evidence that sibling sexual abuse in particular is rarely disclosed, and less reported than sexual abuse by an adult (Carlson et al., 2006). Victims may not disclose due to fears of punishment, blame or not being believed (Meiselman, 1981; Laviola, 1992; Hardy, 2001), or because they are afraid of the sibling, do not understand that what is happening is abuse, do not want their sibling to get into trouble, do not want to upset their parents, or just do not want anyone to know about it (Katy, 2009). In Finkelhor’s (1980) study only 12% of those who reported sibling sexual experiences to the researcher had ever told anyone else, and despite 61% of the participants being in counselling in Carlson et al.’s (2006) study of 41 adult survivors, most said that this was the first time that they had disclosed the abuse. Any statistics relating to the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse are therefore likely to be an underestimate.

To reiterate from the Introduction, while cognisant of all these issues Hackett (2004) estimates that between 1/5 and 1/3 of all cases of sexual abuse in the UK involve children or young people as perpetrators, and a general population survey by Radford et al. (2011) found that nearly 66% of the contact sexual abuse reported by children involved perpetrators under the age of 18. Other studies suggest that siblings account for 1/3 to 1/2 of the victims of children with harmful sexual behaviour (Hackett et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2000; Beckett, 2006; Allardyce and Yates, 2009; Ryan, 2010a).

To put these figures in a bit more context, Putnam (2003) reports that child sexual abuse accounts for 10% of officially substantiated child maltreatment. The concerns identified at child protection case conferences in Scotland in the year 2012-13 involved Neglect in 38% of cases, Physical Abuse in 20% of cases, and Sexual Abuse in 8% of cases (The Scottish Government, 2014a). Sibling sexual abuse would be likely to account for a significant minority of concerns about sexual abuse, but

therefore only a small proportion of the concerns about child abuse in general. While it is probable that sibling sexual behaviour and sibling sexual abuse are issues that social workers will need to confront, and perhaps more often than has generally been recognised, social workers would not be expected to encounter these cases on a very regular basis compared with other issues likely to dominate their caseload.

## **2.5 Theories of sibling sexual abuse**

As well as sibling sexual abuse being harmful to the victim, it may also indicate adverse experiences in the background of the perpetrator. Social workers need to be alert to the protection needs of both children involved.

Most studies of sibling sexual abuse are based on small, clinical samples and without comparison groups (Hardy, 2001), partly due to its relatively low prevalence and recent emergence as a subject of concern. Tidefors et al. (2010) call for international cooperation in order to generate larger sample sizes. Most studies concentrate on the backgrounds of adolescent incest offenders and are atheoretical in nature (Burton et al., 1997). Both Foucault (1976) and Bell (1993) offer sociological explanations of incest, Bell (1993) in particular being concerned that the majority of theorising continues to view incest as an individual problem enacted within the context of dysfunctional families, rather than a wider social problem of gendered power dynamics. Brother-sister incest is the most common sibling incest pairing (Carlson et al., 2006), adding support to Bell’s (1993) view. Notwithstanding these criticisms I will focus on the more common psychological theories.

The “vampire syndrome” hypothesis (O’Brien, 1991) posits that children may sexually abuse other children in response to their own experiences of being sexually abused. There is evidence that prior sexual victimisation is a contributory factor in many cases, and as highlighted in the Introduction, children who sexually abuse siblings are more likely to have been sexually abused than those who abuse unrelated children in the community. However, Yates et al. (2012) report from their clinical study of 34 boys that only 70% of the boys who had abused siblings had been sexually abused themselves. Worling’s (1995) and O’Brien’s (1991) larger studies

involving 60 and 170 boys report figures of 62% and 42% respectively. Clearly there are a significant number of children who sexually abuse their siblings who have not themselves been sexually abused. Social learning models face a similar empirical challenge. Most victims of child sexual abuse do not go on to offend in any way, let alone sexually (Johnson, 2010), and Kaufman and Zigler (1987) conclude that the best estimate of intergenerational transmission of sexual abuse would be in the region of 25-35%.

Social adequacy and blockage theory (O'Brien, 1991) receives some support from the research, suggesting that children with few social skills and therefore few opportunities to meet their sexual needs in healthy ways with same-age peers may turn to inappropriate and harmful means. Younger siblings may be targeted due to their vulnerability and availability. O'Brien's (1991) study of 170 adolescents referred for assessment due to their harmful sexual behaviour found that those children who had abused siblings reported fewer prior sexual experiences than other children of a similar age. Nearly two thirds of these children were described as under-socialised, having poor social skills and few if any peer-age friends. A number of studies support social isolation as a factor predicting recidivism in children with harmful sexual behaviour (Print et al., 2012).

This theory raises the question as to why these children might have poor social skills, however this is defined. Attachment theory is gathering most prominence as an explanation for children's harmful sexual behaviour and for sibling sexual abuse in particular (Caffaro, 2014), albeit that it does not explain why there are so many adolescents with insecure attachments who do not become involved in harmful sexual behaviour. Smallbone (2005) argues that one of the tasks of development is to learn when attachment, care-giving, and sexual behaviours can go together and when they need to be kept separate. In adult romantic relationships it would be appropriate for all three systems to be active, but in adult-child relationships we would expect only the care-giving system to operate. Children with insecure attachment styles may have impaired perspective-taking abilities, coercive behavioural patterns and poor impulse control, which is likely to be reflected in the way that they try to meet their

sexual needs in adolescence. These children may therefore be more vulnerable to engaging in coercive sexual behaviours. Even without an underlying attachment style vulnerability, it may be possible for powerful situational influences to induce less functional independence between the three systems, especially during adolescence when sexual impulses are powerful and social conformity is at its weakest.

Smallbone (2005) does not discuss sibling sexual abuse specifically, but it is not hard to see how attachment theory would offer some understanding of sibling sexual abuse: a lack of functional independence of the attachment, care-giving and sexual systems, a lack of empathy, poor social skills, poor socialisation to sexual cultural norms, and the availability of a younger and more vulnerable child.

Sibling sexual abuse is complex and multi-determined and while there is unlikely to be a single theory which explains all of this behaviour (Murray and Hallett, 2000; Caffaro, 2014), the background characteristics of children who sexually abuse their siblings provide indirect evidence of insecure attachment styles. These children may come from middle and upper class as well as working class families, from different ethnic backgrounds and from non-religious as well as highly religious families (Abrahams and Hoey, 1994). However, there are some common family characteristics, which provide the context for sibling sexual abuse to occur, such as distant and emotionally inaccessible parents (Smith and Israel, 1987; Daie et al., 1989; Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Griffie et al., 2014), loose sexual boundaries and parental stimulation of the sexual climate within the home (Smith and Israel, 1987; Daie et al., 1989; Griffie et al., 2014), conversely a sexually repressed family home where discussion of anything sexual is forbidden (Abrahams and Hoey, 1994), and family secrets, especially with regard to extra-marital affairs (Smith and Israel, 1987; Hardy, 2001). Marital conflict has been reported as a common feature (Adler and Schutz, 1995; Salazar and Camp, 2005; Griffie et al., 2014), as well as a general lack of supervision of the children (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005). Some authors differentiate between power-oriented and nurturance-oriented sibling incest (Bank and Kahn, 1982; Worling, 1995; Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005). Siblings may turn to each other for comfort in the midst of high levels of family conflict, violence and

abuse, and this comforting may become sexualised (Brennan, 2006; Griffie et al., 2014). What starts as mutual behaviour may in time become coerced. Worling (1995) highlights the possibility of sibling sexual abuse being motivated by retribution, and the modelling of family members being appropriate recipients of interpersonal violence. In their computer-assisted self-interview survey mainly involving students, Griffie et al. (2014) found that the four main etiological factors associated with coerced sibling incest were siblings sharing a bed; parent-child incest; witnessing parental physical fighting; and family nudity. Situational factors may play their part; otherwise the evidence points to the likelihood of attachment insecurity and the need to consider whether children who sexually abuse their siblings have been subject to abuse or adverse childcare conditions themselves, as well considering the need to protect the victim of the sibling sexual abuse.

The historical context of sibling sexual behaviour as a subject of concern mirrors the ongoing debates about the extent to which sibling sexual behaviour is harmful and abusive. Some of the more recent literature has widened the definition of sibling sexual abuse, considering it to be potentially extremely harmful to the victim as well as indicating an adverse history in the life of the perpetrator. Sibling sexual behaviour is not abusive or harmful in all cases, however, and there are no universally accepted criteria for differentiating abusive from harmless behaviour. The impact of the behaviour may not be immediately apparent. Social workers have to make their own judgements, and as I will argue below, the legal context suggests that whether or not the sibling sexual behaviour is considered to constitute ‘serious harm’ may be critical to the social workers’ decision making.



## **2.6 The legal context**

From the above discussion it is apparent that sibling sexual behaviour may provide the legal basis for social work involvement in family life by acting as an indicator of adversity as well itself being a cause of harm.

Section 1 of the Children (Scotland) Act (1995) states that parents have the responsibility to safeguard and promote their children’s health, development and welfare up until the child is aged 16, and in order to fulfil this responsibility parents have the right under section 2 to have the child live with them or to decide where the child lives, and otherwise to control or direct the child’s upbringing. Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as enacted by the Human Rights Act (1998), states that a public authority should not interfere with private and family life unless it is necessary and legal to do so, such as for reasons of public safety, the prevention of crime, or the protection of health or morals. Indeed, social workers have a duty to intervene in private and family life in order to safeguard and promote a child’s welfare if it is believed that their health or development may be significantly impaired in the absence of such intervention ((s.22 and s.93(4)(a) of the 1995 Act). As far as is possible and consistent with that duty, social workers should nonetheless continue to promote the upbringing of the child by their family (s.22(1)(b)). Social workers may become involved in safeguarding and promoting a child’s welfare for a range of reasons, such as a lack of parental care, a child being at risk of abuse, a child’s disability, or a child’s offending behaviour.

Children and their families may welcome social work assistance, in which case it can be provided on a voluntary basis. Social workers may need to seek a legal foundation for compulsory involvement via the Children’s Hearing System if the family does not appear willing to cooperate with social services voluntarily. Children’s Hearings are legal tribunals in which a panel of three lay volunteers makes decisions in the best interests of children’s welfare following a meeting involving discussion with the child, and usually their parents and other involved professionals ([chscotland.gov.uk](http://chscotland.gov.uk)).

The Children’s Hearings System was established by the Social Work (Scotland) Act (1968) following the report of the Kilbrandon Commission in 1964. This Commission was set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland to consider the legal provisions relating to the treatment of “juvenile delinquents and juveniles in need of care or protection or beyond parental control” (Edinburgh, 1964 / 1995:5). The report established the principle that young people who commit offences should be regarded as children in need of support and care in the same way as any other child who requires care as a result of abuse or neglect.

Children under the age of 16 may be referred to a Children’s Hearing for one or more of a variety of grounds listed in section 67 of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act (2011), including that they have committed an offence (s.67(2)(j)), are likely to suffer unnecessarily due to a lack of parental care (s.67(2)(a)), or are at risk of abuse or harm (s.67(2)(e)). If a child is referred for any of these or other grounds, the panel may decide whether or not the child requires a compulsory supervision order and if so what conditions may need to be attached to that order. In other words, the panel decides whether a child is required to receive help and support from the local authority on a compulsory basis, or may be allowed to choose whether or not they receive such support on a voluntary basis.

I established earlier that children’s sibling sexual behaviour could be regarded as developmentally appropriate sexual exploration, mutually initiated but harmful sexual behaviour, or sibling sexual abuse. If the behaviour is judged to fall within the latter two categories it is likely that at least one of the siblings involved will have experienced some form of abuse or trauma themselves. Under the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Children (Scotland) Act (1995), sibling sexual behaviour could therefore provide a basis for social work involvement if the behaviour could cause or be seen to result from an impairment to one or more of the children’s health or development. Whether social workers become involved, and the extent of their involvement, may depend upon the degree to which they consider the behaviour to indicate a risk to the children’s health and development. It is not necessary, therefore, for the sexual behaviour to be considered abusive or for a

child to be charged with an offence in order for it to provide a reason for social work to become involved in a family’s life.

If the sibling sexual behaviour does constitute an offence or could develop to become criminal if left unaddressed, it would clearly provide the justification for social work involvement in the life of the family, potentially on both offence and abuse grounds. The criminal age of responsibility in Scotland is set at eight years old (s.41 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act (1995)), so children under that age could not be charged with an offence. While no child under the age of 12 can be prosecuted for an offence (s.52 of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act (2010)), they may still be referred to a Children’s Hearing on the offence ground. It would normally be presumed that offences committed by children over the age of 12 but under the age of 16 would be referred to the Children’s Hearing System rather than the Criminal Justice System, but offences considered serious may sometimes be jointly reported. There are a number of ways in which sexual behaviour between siblings could constitute an offence and therefore provide a basis for social work involvement.

The Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act (1995) sets out the categories of prohibited incestuous relationships in terms of heterosexual sexual intercourse, in other words involving penile penetration of the vagina. Penetration of any other orifices or of the vagina by other means do not constitute an offence of incest. Incest may be committed by “any male” or “any female person” (s.1(1)), and is therefore applicable to children as well as adults, unless they did not consent (s.1(1)(b)). The list of prohibited relationships extends to full and half-blood relationships (s.1(2)(a)) and includes mother, daughter, grandmother, granddaughter, sister, aunt, niece, great grandmother, great granddaughter, and the equivalent male relations. Adoptive mothers or former adoptive mothers, adopted daughters or former adopted daughters, and equivalent fathers and sons, but not brothers and sisters, are also included among the list of prohibited relationships (s.1(1)). If a brother and sister over the age of eight related by full or half blood were to engage in vaginal sexual intercourse this could constitute an offence of incest, but any other behaviours between a brother and sister, or behaviours involving only brothers or only sisters, would not.

As Roffee (2010) highlights, this strictly legal definition of incest is quite different from the way the term may be used by therapists, medical practitioners, the general public, and researchers, where a much broader range of sexual behaviours between siblings of the same and different genders may be regarded as incest. More relevant to the current study therefore, are the range of sexual behaviours which are prohibited under the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act (2009), including rape, sexual assault, and sexual exposure. Again the legislation refers to “a person” (e.g. s.1(1)) and is applicable to sexual behaviours between children as well as adults. Sexual behaviours may be regarded as offences if undertaken without the other person’s consent, defined in section 12 as “free agreement”, the conditions of which are set out in section 13. Whatever these conditions, it is assumed that a child under the age of 13 cannot consent, and it is an offence for any person, including children, to engage in sexual behaviours with a child under the age of 13. These behaviours include sexual touching (s.20(2)(b)), touching that “any reasonable person” would consider sexual (s.60(2)). Section 30 states that adults over the age of 16 may not engage in sexual behaviours with children under the age of 16, and section 37 sets out the sexual behaviours in which it would not be acceptable for children between the ages of 13 and 16 to engage, even if consensual. The 2009 Act therefore maintains the age of sexual consent at 16. Section 52 abolishes other common law sexual offences such as lewd and libidinous behaviour, which may previously have been applicable.

A child over the age of eight engaging with their sibling in any of the sexual behaviours set out in the 2009 Act may therefore be guilty of an offence and could provide the justification for social work involvement in their family’s life. In keeping with the principles of the report of the Kilbrandon Commission, this involvement would be with the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child, as far as possible by promoting the upbringing of the child by their family, as would be the case for any other child whose health or development had been or was at risk of being significantly impaired.

Social workers are often in the position of trying to fulfil their duty to safeguard a child’s welfare on the one hand, and their duty to promote the child’s upbringing by their family on the other. These duties can come into conflict with each other such as in situations where a parent is believed or known to have abused their child, where the child has suffered or is likely to suffer ‘significant harm’ (see, for example, sections 36 and 38 of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011). Faced with such a conflict of duties the welfare of the child should be the paramount consideration. The principle of the paramountcy of the child’s welfare is one of the cornerstones of both the Children (Scotland) Act (1995) (e.g. s.11(7)(a) and 16(1)), and the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act (2011) (e.g. s.25). A common resolution of this conflict of duties might be to remove the abusing parent from the family and allow the child to remain living with a non-abusing parent, therefore removing risk and maintaining the family as far as possible. It may be decided that the child cannot live with either parent, the welfare of the child again being the paramount consideration in such decisions. Thereafter it would need to be decided whether the child can have contact with their parents, as is the parents’ right insofar as it is necessary to enable them to fulfil their parental responsibilities (s.2(1)(c) of the Children (Scotland) Act (1995)). Social workers also need to consider whether the child at some stage may be able to return to live with their parents. In all of these decisions the welfare of the child remains the paramount consideration.

In situations such as sexual behaviour between siblings, however, where a child in the family may be considered the source of abuse or risk to another child in the family, the decision making becomes even more complex. Social workers are then potentially in the position of having to choose between the welfare needs of two or more children. They have to decide whether there may be a way for all siblings to remain at home, or otherwise which sibling(s) to remove. They need to decide whether separated siblings can have contact with each other and whether a return to living together is possible. Sexual behaviour between siblings raises an unusual problem for social workers in having to decide which child’s welfare should be the paramount concern.

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There is very little legislation to guide these decisions. An exception to the paramountcy of the welfare principle can be made “for the purpose of protecting members of the public from serious harm (whether physical or not)” (s.26(1)(a) of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act (2011), replacing s.16(5) of the Children (Scotland) Act (1995)). Assuming that a sibling can be interpreted as a member of the public, this suggests that the needs of a sibling at risk may take priority over the needs of the sibling seen to present the risk, if the risk is thought to be one of ‘serious harm’. This is the key point. Norrie (1998:48) stresses in his annotations to section 16(5) of the 1995 Act that “serious harm is harm that is not trivial” and should not be interpreted lightly. He notes that ‘serious harm’ can include psychological and emotional as well physical harm. How harmful the sibling sexual behaviour is regarded to be, irrespective of whether it constitutes an offence, may therefore be of pivotal importance to the social workers’ decision making with regards to the siblings’ living and contact arrangements.

Apart from section 26 of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act (2011) there is very little legislation to guide social workers in their decision making with respect to sibling sexual behaviour. There is barely any mention of siblings in any child care law in Scotland. Section 23(7) of the Children Act (1989) applicable to England and Wales states that where siblings are both accommodated by the local authority attempts should be made for the siblings to live together (Mullender, 1999), but there is no equivalent section in the Children (Scotland) Act (1995). The Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations (2009) state that consideration should be given to siblings being placed together for adoption if in each sibling’s best interests, but there is no legislation relating to sibling contact in the way that the Children (Scotland) Act (1995) refers to parental contact. Siblings under the age of 16 have not normally been entitled to apply for a contact order under section 11 of the 1995 Act, although exceptions have occasionally been made (Griffiths et al., 2013). Apart from section 26 of the 2011 Act there is therefore very little legislation to guide the social workers in their decision making with regards to sibling contact and living arrangements in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings.

This is not to say that there is no relevant policy which may be of assistance. I chose to interview senior managers within the local authorities involved in the study in order to establish the policy and guidance that they would expect to inform social workers making decisions in this area of work. I will therefore return to the policy context in my methodology and findings.

The legal context suggests that irrespective of the behaviour constituting an offence, whether it has caused or is likely to cause ‘serious harm’ is the key criterion for considering whether or not to prioritise one child’s needs over another’s. Given the lack of consensus over how to define sibling sexual abuse, the possible lack of immediate and observable impact, and the lack of unequivocal evidence as to its likely impact, social workers’ judgements as to the extent to which the behaviour may be harmful are of particular interest. The decisions they make are likely to reflect how harmful they consider the behaviour to be, and to that extent contribute in practice to the construction of sibling sexual behaviour as a form of abuse and a justification for intervention in family life.

## **2.7 Social worker decision making regarding the removal of children from their families, and subsequent contact and reunification**

There has been a long-standing debate in the psychology decision making literature around the optimal way for decisions to be made. Classical decision making theory proposes that to be rational, decision making would involve generating a list of all available courses of action, weighing the expected costs and benefits of each option, and then choosing the course of action which maximises the expected net benefits. This is the so-called “expected utility model”, and according to this theory rational human beings where possible ought to make decisions analytically in this way (van de Luitgaarden, 2009; Taylor, 2010). In the real world, however, rationality is bounded by time constraints, limited available information, and limited capacity to process all of the information (Crea, 2010; Helm, 2010). Decisions need to be made somewhere along a cognitive continuum between completely intuitive and completely analytical approaches depending upon the demands of the particular

situation (Hammond, 1996). In short, the decision making model should fit the task (Hackett and Taylor, 2014). It has been demonstrated that over-analysis can in some circumstances result in a deterioration of decision making ability, and that complex problems may best be solved by the use of simple heuristics (Wilson and Schooler, 1991; van de Luitgaarden, 2009; Gigerenzer et al., 2011). However, heuristics may introduce bias, and more logical forms of reasoning are sometimes essential to counteract and override the biases of heuristic thinking (Munro, 1999; Evans and Over, 2010).

Social workers are generally faced with very large amounts of uncertain, incomplete, and constantly changing information (e.g. O'Sullivan, 1999; Gambrill, 2008; van de Luitgaarden, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Intuitive skills are therefore essential for social work decision making (van de Luitgaarden, 2009). There is a wealth of research indicating that social workers rely on their intuitive skills, and that their decisions are influenced by their past experience, their personal values and beliefs, their personality and temperament, and their personal interpretation of a particular client's situation (e.g. Farmer and Owen, 1995; Shlonsky and Wagner, 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2010; Hackett and Taylor, 2014). There has been corresponding concern that these intuitive decisions may be flawed, and indeed a long history of unease about decision making in child welfare (Gambrill, 2005) and its idiosyncratic nature (Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008). Munro (1999) identified a number of consistent biases in the intuitive decision making of social workers involved in cases which had been the subject of serious case reviews, including their tendency to pay undue attention to memorable data such as the first or latest piece of information; being sceptical of information contradicting their point of view but lacking scepticism of confirmatory evidence; looking for evidence to support their point of view; and being slow to change their minds. Taylor (2010) and Gambrill (2008) provide similar and more comprehensive lists of potential heuristic biases. Intuition may need to be supplemented by analytic tools in order to counteract its potential for bias (Munro, 1999; Gambrill, 2008; Taylor, 2010). Taylor (2010) suggests a repertoire of decision making approaches, including expected utility approaches when making care



planning decisions, naturalistic decision making approaches when supporting client decision making, and satisficing models when making safeguarding decisions.

Despite the concerns about the intuitive and personal nature of social worker decision making, most of the research has focused on case characteristics and factors associated with decisions, rather than the thinking processes of social workers themselves (Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008; Stokes and Schmidt, 2012; Hackett and Taylor, 2014). Platt and Turney (2014) regard the study of social workers’ thinking processes as a pressing task. The research that has been done has tended to focus on investigating allegations, or children being removed from their families (Farmer, 1996; DePanfilis and Girvin, 2005; Crea, 2010), with relatively little attention having been paid to children returning home from care (Biehal, 2007; Farmer, 2014). Social worker decision making regarding children’s contact with their birth family has received even less attention than separation and reunification decision making (Atwool, 2013). Almost all of the research in these areas focuses on concerns about parental abuse, with some attention having been paid to children regarded as ‘villains’ (Packman et al., 1986), ‘disaffected adolescents’ (Farmer, 1996) or ‘difficult adolescents’ (Packman and Hall, 1998). There is no research looking at how social workers make decisions with respect to removal and reunification where a child is the source of risk or abuse within the family. The research on contact decision making focuses mainly on contact with parents or refers to the birth family generally without separating out the particular considerations regarding siblings. Nonetheless there are some points related to these different areas of social work decision making that are worth mentioning.

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Several studies have found that social work decision making often takes place within the context of a lack of clear guidelines and policy (e.g. Packman et al., 1986; Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008; Farmer, 2009), including a lack of guidance over the meaning of ‘significant harm’ (Ayre, 1998). Social workers therefore have considerable discretion over their decision making consistent with Lipsky’s (1980/2010) concept of the street-level bureaucrat (Packman et al., 1986; Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Evans and Harris, 2004; Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010).

In keeping with the findings of many serious case reviews (e.g. Sinclair and Bullock, 2002; Brandon et al., 2012), social workers’ attention is often focused on the parent, the child becoming lost (e.g. Ayre, 1998; Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010; Ward et al., 2012). In Packman et al.’s (1986) study of admissions to care in two English local authority social services departments over a three-year period, the social workers’ evaluations of the parents’ abilities did not differentiate those children who were admitted to care from those who were not admitted. The parents of children admitted to care were often regarded as uncooperative from the outset. Similarly, in McConnell et al.’s (2006) Australian study of 285 care application court files, judgements of parents’ protective capacity was found to be determined not by their ability to keep their children safe, but by their levels of respect for intervention and cooperation with services. Ward et al. (2012), on the other hand, in a prospective longitudinal study of 57 children under the age of one who were the subject of a child protection investigation, found that formal parenting capacity assessments were undertaken in all cases, in the opinion of the authors sometimes causing unnecessary delay to the decision making. Rather than social workers, they found that other involved professionals sometimes recommended that the name of the child be removed from the child protection register, against the social worker’s advice, on the basis of parental engagement with services.

Carnochan et al. (2013) concluded from a literature review that services were not matched to parent need, so reunification depended more on compliance than meaningful change. Similarly, in her study of 321 children returned home following compulsory admission to local authority care, Farmer (1996) found that one third of

reunifications were brought about by pressure from parents and the children themselves, and that renewed abuse was often tolerated if the parents were cooperative. In addition, one fifth of the children “graduated” home when they left school or when their placement ended, and social workers were tempted to think that risk reduced with time. Farmer (2009) observes that reunification only exceptionally takes place in the absence of pressure from some quarter, and occurs too frequently without resolution of the problems that initially led to the child being accommodated. Biehal (2007) similarly comments from a review of the literature that social workers tend to assume that a return home will be positive, yet in Farmer et al.’s (2011) study of 180 children returned home from care across six local authorities in a one-year period, almost half had been subsequently maltreated after a follow-up interval of two years, rising to two thirds of the children after five years (Lutman and Farmer, 2013; Farmer, 2014). In a study of 3,872 children across 7 local authorities, Wade et al. (2011) found similarly that where children had returned home and were reported as settled after 6 months, in one third of cases the placements subsequently broke down. They found that which local authority was responsible for the decision making was more strongly associated with the decisions taken than the characteristics of the children and families, a finding also supported by Packman and Hall (1998). In contrast with Sinclair’s (2005) observation of a lack of planning in reunification decision making, however, Wade et al. (2011) found evidence of purposeful planning in 67% of cases.

Turning specifically to decision making about sibling contact, while there is very little research in this area, the general assumption seems to be that contact between siblings should take place unless an assessment specifically suggests otherwise. Guidance rarely indicates what these contraindications would be (see, for example, SCIE/NICE, 2010). The potential importance for children of maintaining relationships with their siblings by being placed together or by maintaining contact has been well documented (e.g. Kosonen, 1996; McAuley, 1996; Macaskill, 2002; Herrick and Piccus, 2005; Hindle, 2007). Bilson and Barker (1992) highlighted a concern, however, that siblings lost contact with each other once accommodated

separately. Lundström and Sallnäs (2012), in their Swedish study of 240 children in out-of-home care, found that the longer children were in care, the less contact they had with their siblings, a finding also supported by research into contact with the birth family more generally (Selwyn, 2004). It has been observed that in the longer-term sibling contact is largely left to foster carers to organise and social workers cease to take such an active role (James et al., 2008; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Hindle (2007) and Sinclair (2005) have concluded that siblings’ meaning to each other tends to be underestimated by social workers. Others disagree, observing that the importance of maintaining sibling relationships is well understood by social workers, but many siblings live separately or have little contact with each other due to limitations of resources and the practical difficulties involved in facilitating contact between children who are not placed together (Kosonen, 1996; Shlonsky et al., 2005; Atwool, 2010).

Some authors have cautioned against an uncritical view that sibling contact should be supported in all circumstances, arguing that each case requires individual assessment (Beckett, 2002). In their review of the literature, Lord and Borthwick (2009) argue that contact should always be considered as a possibility, but that careful assessment should be undertaken as to its nature on the basis of the children’s individual needs and the quality of the sibling relationship. In particular, contact could be contraindicated if the sibling relationship is abusive, or if contact would cause trauma or disruption (e.g. Macaskill, 2002; Herrick and Piccus, 2005; Lord and Borthwick, 2009). Macaskill (2002) studied 106 children in permanent placements, conducting interviews with adoptive and foster parents as well as children themselves. Of particular relevance to this current study are Macaskill’s (2002) findings that where children were placed separately due to sexual activity between them, contact between the siblings was maintained. In seven cases (it is not stated out of how many) further sexual incidents occurred during contact and in only four of those cases was contact then suspended. Macaskill (2002) provides examples of social workers reportedly insisting on contact despite it being very distressing for one of the children.

The social workers were not consulted as part of the study, however, so it is not known what informed and influenced the decisions they are reported to have taken.

## **2.8 The sibling incest literature on separation, reunification and contact**

While there is no research looking at how social workers make decisions with respect to separation, contact and reunification in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, there is a practice literature on the subject within the literature on children with harmful sexual behaviour.

This literature remains divided over the subject of whether and under what circumstances a sibling should be removed from the family following an incident of sibling sexual abuse becoming known. Tapara (2012) and Costin et al. (2009) argue strongly in their practice guidance that sibling sexual abuse needs to be understood within an analysis of power and control, and that contact should be stopped between the children pending a more thorough assessment of the motivation, risk of recurrence, and impact of the behaviour. Ballantine (2012) presents two case studies and similarly suggests initial separation, concluding that before trying to resolve family relationships practitioners need to understand the case-specific pattern of abuse and the impact on the victim. These authors are clear that the needs of the victim should be given priority. Welfare (2008), however, in a study of 21 families’ experiences and responses to sibling sexual abuse, emphasises that a perpetrator’s recovery from their behaviour would be hindered by separation from their family. She argues that strenuous attempts should be made to keep the perpetrator connected. Welfare (2008) maintains nonetheless that the needs of the victim must ultimately be prioritised, and concludes that while perpetrators need support and confrontation from their parents, the victim requires unequivocal support. Caffaro (2014) echoes Welfare’s (2008) concerns about the perpetrator’s needs and contends that separation should be considered only where there are concerns about immediate physical safety, although later qualifies this to say that separation may need to be considered if the perpetrator’s continued presence causes “significant distress” (Caffaro, 2014:134).

In describing the complexities and dilemmas faced by practitioners when making decisions about the separation and reunification of siblings following sibling sexual abuse, Keane et al. (2013) argue that an adult feminist paradigm which privileges the needs of the victim over the perpetrator is obsolete; the needs of the victim and perpetrator should be considered equally. Only where there are immediate safety concerns should one of the children be required to leave the family home, and this could be either the victim or the perpetrator:

The current emphasis on the wishes of the child victim of abuse cannot always be privileged, nor in our opinion, are of more importance than the needs of the offending sibling. After all, this young person is also a child. (Keane et al., 2013:248)

Other commentators argue that each case should be treated on its own merits (Fahy, 2011; Kambouridis, 2012), and Fahy (2011) provides the useful beginnings of an assessment framework for the placement of siblings under 10 years old in situations where neither child can remain living at home with their birth parents, although offers no guidance with respect to sibling contact.

There is a growing consensus that sibling sexual abuse should prompt a family-based rather than individual response (e.g. Thornton et al., 2008; McNevin, 2010; Keane et al., 2013; Caffaro, 2014). There are a number of examples of practice literature from clinical psychology and family therapy outlining processes of family reunification that the authors argue should be followed (e.g. Digiorgio-Miller, 1998; Schladale, 2002; Haskins, 2003; Thomas and Viar, 2005). These processes have much in common. They suggest that reunification should not be approached as a simple decision as to whether or not children should live together, but should be a staged process. This is also reflected by Carnochan al.’s (2013) more widely applicable recommendations that reunification should lie on a continuum including telephone and letter contact, and periodic face-to-face contact, as well as children actually returning to live at home with their parents. Thomas and Viar (2005) outline a seven stage process involving an initial clarification meeting, reconciliation involving supervised contact, trials of home contact, and full reunification, progression through

these stages being contingent upon how they are experienced. They suggest that family resolution, rather than reunification, might be a more helpful term. Contact between siblings following sibling sexual abuse should therefore take place only as part of this staged process of family resolution. They outline a number of benefits to both siblings of resolution being attempted, including an opportunity to resolve loyalty dilemmas and an opportunity to be confronted with the impact of the abuse. Therapeutic tasks for the abusing child, abused child, non-abusing siblings and parents all need to be successfully achieved in order for this process to progress. These tasks are not simply a matter of ensuring safety, but of uncovering and transforming the family and sibling dynamics which promoted the sexual abuse in the first place. While these models of family reunification have much in common, it is not clear to what extent social work practice follows the guidance these models present.

## **2.9 Conclusions**

There are several different strands of literature which combine to provide a rationale for the study. There has been a long-standing and widely-held view that sexual behaviour between siblings is generally harmless, but over the last twenty-five years or so this view has been challenged. What had previously been understood as harmless sexual play might often be better understood as abuse, and research studies have found that sibling sexual abuse may have very serious short- and long-term sequelae. However, most of the research on the impact of sibling sexual abuse has involved small, clinical samples and there are no universally agreed criteria for differentiating between harmless sex play and abusive sibling sexual behaviour. Consensus on the extent to which, and the circumstances in which, sibling sexual behaviour is harmful has not been reached. How social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and its impact is particularly important in light of their role to make decisions regarding the involvement of the State in the private lives of families. The decisions social workers make contribute to the extent to which sibling sexual behaviour is constructed as a form of abuse, and indeed the legislation suggests that the extent to which social workers consider sibling sexual behaviour to

constitute or indicate ‘serious harm’ would be of pivotal importance in their decision making.

The social work decision making literature has been weighted towards research concerning decisions about child protection and removing children from their families, with less attention having been paid to reunification decision making and less still on contact decision making. The research has tended to focus on case factors and characteristics rather than the thinking processes of social workers, despite evidence that their decision making is likely to be intuitive and personal in nature. In addition, the research has concentrated almost entirely on concerns about abuse of a child by a parent, with some attention paid to children’s ‘difficult’ behaviour, but very little has been written about social worker decision making in cases where a child in the family is considered the source of risk. Prevalence statistics suggest that while social workers may not encounter these kinds of cases very frequently, it is likely that they will do so at some stage. Given the potential for the sibling sexual behaviour to have a very serious impact, and equally the possibility that it may not, coupled with what is known about the potentially harmful implications for children of being separated from their parents and siblings, the decisions social workers make in these cases are of critical importance. It is therefore a subject meriting investigation.

The lack of prior research on this subject points to the need for an approach which is exploratory (David and Sutton, 2004) and theory generating rather than aiming to test previously constructed hypotheses. In taking an exploratory approach, the research will not aim to test social worker decision making against any particular theoretical models; rather it will be located within and make a contribution to the school of descriptive decision study of real-world decision making (Taylor, 2010), describing how social workers make these decisions in order to support reflexive practice.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction and research questions**

As discussed in the Introduction, my initial interest in this research was prompted by my practice experience with a specialist service for children who display harmful sexual behaviour, where most of the cases with which I worked involved siblings as victims. My experience was that decision making in these cases was difficult and often characterised by perplexing disagreement with social workers holding case management responsibility from the local authority, especially regarding decisions about sibling contact and reunification. A focus group with specialist child sexual abuse practitioners confirmed that my experience was far from unique and that exploring how social workers make decisions in these cases could provide a useful contribution to practice. I was therefore interested to understand from the social workers’ perspective the basis upon which they make decisions in this area. I began with a particular interest in contact and reunification decision making, within which I could explore how social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and the harm it may cause. Recruiting participants for the study looking solely at these decisions proved extremely difficult. Extending the sample to include cases where siblings had remained living together proved more successful in yielding participants, while maintaining the integrity of the study’s broader aims.

A review of the literatures confirmed the value of such a study. Most research of social worker decision making has focused on case characteristics rather than the thinking processes of social workers. No research has yet been undertaken of social worker decision making where a child in the family is the source of risk or abuse. Social workers are likely to encounter cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, and their decisions may have significant consequences for the children and families involved. With a lack of consensus over how to differentiate harmless from harmful sibling sexual behaviour, and ongoing debate about the impact of sibling sexual abuse, how social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and the harm it causes are of particular interest. With only limited legislation to guide their

decisions, the policy context requires specific exploration. The following aims and research questions therefore emerged:

### **3.1.1 The research aims**

The aims of this research are to explore how social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and to develop an understanding from their perspective of how they make decisions regarding separation, contact and reunification of siblings following the coming to light of sibling sexual behaviour.

### **3.1.2 Research questions**

1. How do social workers account for the decisions they have made regarding separation, contact and reunification of siblings following sibling sexual behaviour becoming known?
2. What do social workers’ accounts of these decisions indicate about their perceptions of the impact of sibling sexual behaviour?
3. What policy and guidance is available to social workers to inform their decision making in this area?

The research design evolved in a circular and iterative fashion. Having developed a broad outline for my approach, decisions about some of the finer details were informed by a deepening understanding of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research. Decisions about how to analyse the data required me to re-visit my research questions and overall methodology. Some practical considerations had a bearing on my approach, and some changes needed to be made as the project unfolded. I will not attempt to re-create this whole process in the exposition of my research design but will set out the methods at which I eventually arrived, making some comments to indicate how my thinking developed, and concluding with some reflections on the ways in which the design might have been refined. I will start by exploring the ontological and epistemological assumptions that have laid the foundation for my research, and will go on to explain in more detail the methods I have deployed and the research decisions taken.

## **3.2 Research design: Research questions 1 and 2**

### **3.2.1 Research assumptions**

As outlined above, my starting point was to try to understand from the social workers’ perspective how they made decisions regarding separation, contact and reunification in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. To take this research forward a number of authors argue the importance of ensuring that data production methods reflect consistent views of the nature of the world, and how we come to know the world (e.g. Cresswell, 2007; Hay, 2007; Blaikie, 2010). In other words, research methods need to be built upon a clear set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. These research assumptions need to be made explicit as they will influence the conduct of the study (Cresswell, 2007) and cannot be selected retrospectively in order conveniently to support a preferred methodology (Hay, 2007). I therefore began the design process by establishing my research assumptions.

The two basic ontological positions of realism (there is a world out there) and idealism (the world only exists in our imagination) (Blaikie, 2007) have been refined to produce a number of alternative and more subtly distinct positions in relation to the social world, with an according array of epistemological assumptions. There is little consistency in the social research literature in the way that they are defined. A variety of different terms may be used, such as “‘scientific realism’, ‘critical realism’, ‘fallibilistic realism’, ‘subtle realism’, and ‘transcendental realism’” (Robson, 2002:29), not to mention ‘atheistic idealism’, ‘perspective idealism’, ‘constrained idealism’ and agnostic idealism’ (Blaikie, 2007). Blaikie (2007) comments that different authors use different terms to refer to the same ideas, while the same terms are used to express different ideas. Barbour (2008) similarly acknowledges the confusion in the literature, although confounds the problem by conflating definitions of epistemology and ontology. Cresswell (2007) adds ‘axiology’, ‘rhetoric’ and ‘methodology’ to his list of philosophical assumptions, and in so doing loses sight of what an assumption is. All of this confusion may suggest that having clear ontological and epistemological assumptions is not so important

after all. Denzin and Lincoln (1998a:4) describe the qualitative researcher as “bricoleur”, who can move happily between different perspectives. As a novice, however, I decided not to shy away from the challenge of a clear and consistent ontological and epistemological position.

From the reading that I have undertaken, the most thorough and helpful rendering of the discussion around research assumptions has been provided by Blaikie (2007; 2010), and as a result of my deliberations I adopted the assumptions of a subtle realist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Blaikie, 2007). This means:

1. that whilst I believe there is an external reality which constrains how we view the world and the meanings we attach to it, we are not able to observe or perceive this reality directly or independently of our beliefs, values and past experiences;
2. that there are therefore no absolute and universally accepted criteria for establishing what can be regarded as true; and
3. that knowledge is constructed socially, and social scientific knowledge is achieved by reinterpreting the everyday knowledge of social actors in technical language (Blaikie, 2007; 2010).

### **3.2.2 Reflexivity**

It follows from point 1 that my own beliefs, values and past experiences will influence how I perceive and interpret the data generated from the research. Moreover, my self or my identity will influence the whole process of the research: the questions I seek to answer; how I seek answers to those questions; what I hear in response; and how I interpret those responses. As I have argued elsewhere, the research process will continue to influence my developing identity:

The identities of the researcher and the respondents, and the research process itself, are all in a dynamic and mutually influencing relationship with each other (Yates, 2013:31).

My theory of self is drawn from Symbolic Interactionism, a body of social theory which focuses upon the process of interpersonal interaction by the use of symbols of

meaning (Bilton et al., 1996; Giddens, 2006). Symbolic interactionist theorists maintain that the self is neither singular nor innate; rather it is socially constructed through repeated interactions with others and our ability to put ourselves in others’ shoes, to see ourselves as we perceive others to see us (Mead, 1912 / 2002; Cooley, 1922 / 2002). Hewitt (2007) suggests that in any given social situation we bring a self composed of personal, situated, and social identities (Hewitt, 2007). Conducting research is one such social situation to which our identities are brought, and through which our identities are created.

In keeping with this symbolic interactionist view of self, it was important to maintain an awareness of how my self was both influential and influenced throughout the research process. This kind of awareness is commonly referred to as ‘reflexivity’. The concept of reflexivity has been defined and practised in a number of different ways (Finlay, 2003; D’Cruz et al., 2007). In broad terms, my concern was to be constantly aware of the dynamic and mutually influencing relationship between my (personal, situated, and social) self as the researcher, the selves of the participants, and the research process. Reflexive awareness should also extend to dynamics of power (Yates, 2013), which Foucault (1976) conceptualises as almost synonymous with knowledge, each producing the other. Power dynamics within the research process are the site of knowledge production, an awareness of these dynamics therefore being important.

Several authors suggest that a reflexive journal be maintained throughout the research process and that a reflexive commentary should be included in the research report (e.g. Finlay and Gough, 2003; Roulston, 2010). In keeping with point 2 from my research assumptions (that there are no absolute and universally accepted criteria for establishing what can be regarded as true), Gough (2003) cautions that this reflexive commentary should not be used as a way to allay criticisms of researcher bias and to make positivist truth claims of greater rigour and research validity. Gouldner (1973) argues that it would be naïve to assume that we know ourselves so well that we can offer a comprehensive and wholly accurate account of our values, a

view consistent with symbolic interactionist theory. Wolcott (2001:67) therefore recommends to “put yourself squarely in the picture, but don’t take centre stage”.

Paying heed to this advice, I will not burden the thesis with a continuous reflexive commentary; rather I have addressed reflexivity in the following way: I will provide a statement of my ‘position’ (Bondi, 2003) at the start of the research (below), which will indicate some issues, of which I needed to remain aware during the research process. According to Fook (2012), positionality

involves an ability to recognise one’s social position and its influence in any one context, and therefore to act in ways which take this into account. (Fook, 2012:196)

I will review this position within chapter 9. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, including notes taken immediately at the end of each interview. Some extracts from these notes are provided by way of illustration in Appendices 1 and 2.

### **3.2.3 Research strategy**

From the above discussion it is clear that whatever knowledge is produced by the research will be influenced by the identities of the researcher and researched, created in interaction with each other through the research process. Knowledge is socially constructed, and point 3 from my research assumptions (social scientific knowledge is achieved by reinterpreting the everyday knowledge of social actors in technical language), along with my original research aims, pointed to my research strategy being abductive (Blaikie, 2010). With this strategy the researcher gathers some preliminary accounts from the participants of the phenomenon in question and then starts to generate some tentative theory, before returning for more data gathering to refine and develop the emerging theory. The strategy entails alternating between data gathering and periods of reflection and analysis, the theory being generated as part of the research process (Blaikie, 2010). The starting point of my research was therefore the meanings and interpretations that the social workers themselves gave to their social world (Blaikie, 2007), suggesting that interviews would be my primary form

of data generation. My perspective was broadly interpretivist (Blaikie, 1991), my role being to interpret the social workers’ interpretation, what Giddens (1984) calls the “double hermeneutic” (Blaikie, 2007:162). In other words, my task was to listen to how social workers themselves described and accounted for their decisions, and then offer my own theoretical interpretation of their collective accounts. I did not attempt any kind of aggregated quantitative study, and being concerned with description, the research was qualitative in nature (Blaikie, 2010).

### **3.2.4 Grounded theory**

Consistent with an abductive research strategy and given the exploratory nature of the study, I chose grounded theory as my overarching methodology. There are a number of examples in social work decision making research where grounded theory techniques have been used for data analysis (e.g. Platt, 2006; Dunworth and Kirwan, 2009; McDonald, 2010; Horwath, 2011), and there are also examples of grounded theory methodology being adopted more completely (e.g. Dickens, 2007; Dunn et al., 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2010). It is an established approach in this field.

Grounded theory was first introduced to social research through Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) seminal work “The discovery of grounded theory”. In opposition to the emphasis at the time upon the deductive verification and testing of extant theory against data, Glaser and Strauss (1967) set out an inductive methodology for generating new theory from data. In its original form, a broad area of research interest is identified and some preliminary data collection undertaken, such as through unstructured interviews or participant observation, whereby a more specific research question emerges from what the participants identify as their main areas of concern. Through initial analysis of this preliminary data, tentative hypotheses are generated relating to the research question. Further participants are then sought in order to extend and refine these hypotheses, a process known as theoretical sampling. Data analysis is undertaken through a process of constant comparison, with each incident of a phenomenon being compared to another in order to develop the emergent theory, theory which is therefore always grounded in the data from which it

was induced. Data collection and analysis are continued in dialogue with each other, the research questions and theory becoming more defined and refined as the project unfolds. Theoretical saturation is attained once any new data do not add anything to the theory. It is evident that this outline description of grounded theory closely resembles Blaikie’s (2010) explanation of an abductive research strategy.

Grounded theory has been subject to revision and development by a number of authors (such as Glaser, 1978; 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006) with debates and controversies continuing to be aired along several lines, not least between the founding authors themselves. Both Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) seem to speak from a positivist standpoint. Glaser and Strauss (1967:39) regard the researcher as a “passive receiver of impressions”, becoming active only at the point of theory generation from the data, a position Glaser maintains (Glaser, 2002). While Glaser (2002) rejects concerns about accuracy, Strauss and Corbin (1998) frequently discuss ‘validity’ and ‘objectivity’. Neither of these interpretations of grounded theory are compatible with my research assumptions. Charmaz (2006), however, has made constructivist revisions, observing that “we are not passive receptacles into which data are poured” (Charmaz, 2006:15), and recognising that the researcher and the research methods will affect what is seen and heard as well as what sense is made of the data. Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist and interpretive position has its roots firmly in Symbolic Interactionism and therefore fits well with my view of self and my subtle realist and social constructionist research assumptions. I therefore chose to follow Charmaz’s model as closely as possible.

### **3.2.5 Data generation**

In keeping with my social constructionist epistemology I will follow Charmaz (2006) in referring to ‘data generation’ rather than ‘data collection’. A number of methods are available to explore social worker decision making, such as use of vignettes, observation, interviews, and case file analysis (Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010). The larger-scale studies have combined different methods (e.g. Packman et al., 1986;



Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Farmer et al., 2011; Wade et al., 2011). Decision making in social work is a protracted and complex process rather than being a discrete event in the way that the term implies (Packman et al., 1986; Vernon and Fruin, 1986; O'Sullivan, 1999), and given its intuitive and personal nature I wished to study real-life decisions as they unfolded. I was interested to explore what Darlington and Scott (2002) call the “swampy lowland of practice” (Kam and Midgley, 2006:30). The initial aim of grounded theory is to understand the world from the perspective of the research participants (Charmaz, 2006), and in keeping with my research assumptions I chose to conduct in-depth interviews with social workers who had had case management responsibility for cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings as my primary method of data generation. The interviews involved talking retrospectively through a case from start to finish, exploring the decisions that were made along the way. Charmaz (2006) recommends intensive qualitative interviewing as being particularly suitable for grounded theory research, and retrospective interviews as a way to explore social workers’ thinking processes in their decision making have been used by a number of previous researchers (e.g. Woodcock, 2003; Dickens, 2007; Talbot, 2008; Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2010).

One of the obvious limitations of retrospective interviews is that social workers’ interpretations of their decision making may not be the same after the fact as at the time (Schutz, 1963), and Gadd (2004) also comments that memory is motivated: there may be a discrepancy between the “told story” and the “lived life” (Gadd, 2004:384). Christiansen and Anderssen (2010) noted the possibility that the social workers’ accounts in their study might have been influenced by the interviewers’ questions and that social workers may have emphasised some aspects of the case and downplayed others in order to legitimise their decisions. A prospective design, however, would risk influencing the very process I aim to observe (Vernon and Fruin, 1986), and I considered that as relatively few cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour are likely to be dealt with at any one time, a prospective design involving observation would not be practical for PhD purposes. I considered

that observation, particularly in light of my previous experience, would risk privileging my voice as the researcher over those of the social workers.

Many researchers have analysed case files alongside interviews as a contemporaneous record of events and decision making (e.g. Packman et al., 1986; Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Farmer et al., 2011; Hackett and Taylor, 2014). However, when I approached local authorities for initial feedback as to whether they would be interested in supporting the study, the advice they gave was that consent would need to be granted by service users in order to access case files. The local authorities’ concerns about confidentiality and anonymity were particularly acute given the perceived stigma that intrafamilial sexual behaviour carries, the low numbers of cases, and the greater potential therefore for individuals to be identifiable. My experience has been that very few families are happy for more people than necessary to know about sibling sexual behaviour which has taken place within their family. Asking families for consent might in itself raise difficult feelings, and would be likely to have placed tight restrictions around the scope of the study.

With the local authorities’ permission, I instead asked social workers to prepare for the interview by reading back through the case files in order to assist their recall of the key debates and dilemmas. I asked them to prepare a chronology of events which they could refer to during the interview in order to help capture some of the detail and complexity of the case rather than relying on what might be an idealised or simplified reconstruction of events based solely on memory. I also asked if they could supply an anonymised version of an assessment report, which might provide some understanding of the decisions made at the time and areas for useful exploration in the interview. I could not insist on this level of preparation, however. Many of the social workers who wished to take part in the study advised that they may not have the time to prepare for the interview so thoroughly in advance.

All that having been said, my research assumptions would challenge ideas of ‘accuracy’, the case files having no greater claim to truth than the social workers’ retrospective accounts. While accepting the socially constructed nature of knowledge

produced through interviews, they would be an appropriate place to start to explore decision making in this area of practice. Interviews are a site for constructing knowledge, not just discovering it, and through the interview process the social workers’ interpretive capabilities would be stimulated and cultivated (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). Regardless of their ‘accuracy’, the social workers’ retrospective accounts could still be said to provide insight into social workers’ thinking processes and how they make sense of sibling sexual behaviour, and therefore provide a useful basis upon which to build an initial theory.

Charmaz (2006) comments that interviewers must always be aware of how participants perceive them, and how both the participants’ and the researcher’s identities may influence the interview process and content. Having established that my method of data generation would be in-depth interviews, this is an appropriate point to state my position at the outset of the research, as this had a bearing on how I developed the interview schedule.

#### **3.2.5.1 My position at the beginning of the research**

As Bondi (2003) comments, I come to the research with a plurality of positions. The most salient features of my social identity are as a white, middle-class male in my early forties, educated to the level of studying for a PhD, with English as my first language. I have worked as a social worker in a local authority Children and Families practice team and I remember clearly the demands and pressures of working in this area. To that extent I am an ‘insider’ (Coar and Sim, 2006) with knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the context within which children and families social work takes place. This may help the interviews insofar as I may not need to ask so many questions about basic terminology, concepts, and social work processes, such as what is a ‘Child Protection Case Conference’ or ‘Looked After Child Review’. My experience may give me credibility with participants, a sense that they will be talking to someone who understands what it is like to be in their shoes. However, I may also be in danger of assuming shared knowledge and missing some rich details as a result.

I have memories of brief involvement as a newly-qualified duty social worker<sup>1</sup> in a case which involved sexual behaviour between siblings, when I did not have any insight into the possible significance or implications of this behaviour. It will be helpful to remember this, as I have since worked as a senior practitioner in a specialist service working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour. During that time I amassed considerable experience of working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour. I have some publications on the subject and have presented at national and international conferences. I could be said to have developed a degree of expertise in the area. I developed some clear ideas as to the criteria for making decisions with respect to sibling contact and living arrangements, albeit not with certainty or without awareness of there being more to learn about the subject. Nonetheless there would be a danger of being critical, of measuring the participants against some preconceived standard of practice, and of projecting a prescription for what a ‘good decision’ should look like (Sinding and Aronson, 2003). I would need to be careful not to end up interrogating the social worker about their practice (Charmaz, 2006). There may also be a tendency to become invested in the case, exploring it out of my own interest as a practitioner rather than learning about the decision making from the social worker’s perspective. Having clarity of purpose and a clear interview schedule with rehearsed follow-up questions may help to an extent, but an ongoing awareness of these dangers would be important. I have also worked as a Teaching Fellow, teaching social work to students undertaking qualifying programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Finally I am a student, a novice researcher, full of anxiety and uncertainty, working hard to make the transition from conducting interviews as a social worker to conducting interviews as a researcher.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘duty’ system involved working with cases for one-off appointments or phone calls when the cases were either brand new referrals, did not meet a threshold for allocation to an individual social worker, or were awaiting allocation. Typically a social worker would be ‘on duty’ for a half or whole day, working with a number of different cases in that time.

Some of the participants may know me only as the researcher, although not necessarily with awareness of my inexperience. Others may have known me already as a social worker, a senior practitioner, as a teacher at University, or in more than one of these roles. Even without having known me professionally in the past, all of the participants would know from the information for participants about my background and experience, which I had included in the interests of openness and transparency, and with consideration that this might give the research credibility and encourage participation. My sense of my own identity may not accord with the participant's. I may feel like a novice researcher; they may see me as a peer, or an expert. Participants may be looking for an opportunity to learn more about this area of work from the interview, to be given feedback on their work, or may experience the interview as a test of their knowledge and respond defensively (Coar and Sim, 2006). There may be complex dynamics of multiple identities and power relationships that I would need to be aware of in the research process, and which are likely to influence the knowledge that is co-constructed in that process (Charmaz, 2006). I needed to take these possibilities into account when designing the interview schedule and in how I conducted the interviews.

#### **3.2.5.1.1 The interview schedule**

The interview schedule was designed to start with rapport building (Legard et al., 2003; Crandall et al., 2006) and reassurance around the social worker's possible anxieties about being tested. A general exploration of the background to the case acted as a useful warm-up question (Woodcock, 2003), before ascertaining how the social worker became involved and tracing their decision making throughout the process of the case (Benbenishty, 1992). Whittaker (2009) recommends avoiding 'Why?' questions as they can appear confrontational, like a cross-examination. Instead, Charmaz (2006) advocates developing a few broad and open-ended 'How' and 'What' questions, thinking through possible follow-up questions in order to help avoid issuing unrehearsed questions which may be loaded with preconceived concepts, therefore inadvertently forcing the data. This would be a particular point of concern as result of my reflections above. Crandall et al. (2006) have developed the

Critical Decision Method as a way of conducting retrospective interviews to uncover the decision making process, and I drew upon some of their ideas particularly in relation to follow-up questions. I did not adopt their method wholesale, and tried to avoid their suggestion of hypothetical “What if?” questions, intending to stay as close as possible to social workers’ experiences rather than straying into opinion-seeking. Having discussed the case in detail, I moved on to some ending questions adapted from Charmaz (2006) in order to allow the participant the opportunity to offer further reflections. Charmaz (2006) recommends trimming the questions to as few as possible, and the interview schedule I took as my guide to interviews and which I supplied to the local authorities when seeking permission to conduct my research is provided in Appendix 3. I also developed an extended interview schedule with ideas for possible follow-up questions annotated to indicate their rationale, which is provided in Appendix 4.

The participants selected the case or cases they wished to discuss. Where they wished to discuss more than one case, each was taken in turn and its process traced from start to finish before moving on to the next, making some comparisons between the cases as the interview unfolded. Ending questions were left until both cases had been explored.

I prepared for fieldwork by undertaking a course in conducting research interviews, and I carried out a pilot interview (Whittaker, 2009) with a social worker from a voluntary organisation specialising in children with harmful sexual behaviour. This resulted in minor changes being made to the interview questions and process. Charmaz (2006) stresses the importance of remaining reflexive about the nature of questions and whether or not they work. I found that one question in particular did not work, relating to how social workers differentiated between sexual behaviour that is developmentally expected and behaviour that would raise the social worker’s concerns. In the context of my previous professional role this question was experienced as a test of the social worker’s knowledge. I adapted this question by couching it in the context of disagreement and confusion in the literature on the subject, therefore wishing to hear from the social workers ‘what stood out for them’

in forming their judgement as to whether or not the behaviour was OK. One question that I found helpful was asking the social workers to describe the family, their circumstances, and the main issues with which they were faced. This usually helped the social workers to relax and talk about the case, and most of the interview could then be spent asking follow-up questions.

At the end of the interview I asked some specific demographic questions in order to be able to describe the sample of participants. These questions were asked at the end so that participants might feel more able to refuse to answer any questions they felt were too personal, and so that asking personal questions would also feel more comfortable having by then established a relationship. As a grounded theory study it was hard to know what questions to ask as it was not clear what kinds of variables might be useful to explore and compare in the development of the theory. Despite exploring the thinking processes of social workers, very few studies provide any significant information about the social workers themselves (e.g. Woodcock, 2003; Dickens, 2007; Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010). I chose to ascertain very basic demographic data (age, gender, and ethnicity) in order to compare the sample of social workers with the data collected on the characteristics of the wider Scottish Social Service Workforce (The Scottish Government, 2010c). Statistics are unfortunately collected differently now. This data provides information about ethnicity only in terms of being White or Minority, which I thought may be very dismissive of other identities. I therefore provided a wider range of options drawn from the 2001 census.

One of the factors that may influence decision making is experience (Crandall et al., 2006; Talbot, 2008). Following Talbot (2008) I therefore asked about the number of years the social worker had been qualified and the qualifications held. van de Luitgaarden (2009) suggests that social workers may make decisions according to Klein’s (1998) Recognition Primed Decision Making Model. According to this model, social workers make an assessment of a case, during which they recognise patterns from previous similar cases. They then mentally simulate decisions and their possible outcomes, cognisant of their previous experience and the differences in this

particular case, until alighting on a decision that is ‘good enough’. I therefore asked about the numbers of previous cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour and sibling sexual behaviour specifically that the social workers had dealt with, and as a final proxy for experience I asked about the relevant training social workers had received, which I also quantified into numbers of days. The participant sampling questionnaire is provided in Appendix 5.

As for the characteristics of the cases, I asked about the age and sex of the children involved on the basis that these characteristics may influence professional responses (Hackett, 2004; Robinson, 2005). I asked about the nature of the sexual behaviour, and otherwise the characteristics emerged according to the social workers’ accounts.

With the approval of the local authorities, I asked the social worker’s permission to contact them again to ask for a shorter follow-up interview should this be helpful in order to explore some of the contradictions and inconsistencies within the narrative provided (Gadd, 2004), or more likely any subjects of interest that I noticed for the first time during analysis, which I had not picked up on during the interview. All of the initial interviews were conducted face-to-face, and follow-up interviews were a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews according to the needs of the participant and how lengthy the interview was likely to be. All interviews were recorded for later transcription so that I could give my full attention to the interview participants and maintain a verbatim record for detailed analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

I anticipated that while I would maintain the core interview schedule throughout the research, the schedule would evolve through the process of theoretical sampling within the grounded theory approach (Furniss et al., 2011; Idrees et al., 2011). I could also use the responses from previous participants to stimulate reflection upon the decision making process (Charmaz, 2006).



### 3.2.6 Recruitment and Theoretical Sampling

According to Charmaz,

Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your category(ies) until no new properties emerge. (Charmaz, 2006:96)

In keeping with a grounded theory methodology my intention was for my sampling strategy to be initially purposive and then theoretical (Furniss et al., 2011). Having undertaken and analysed some initial interviews I would seek social workers and cases with particular characteristics to elaborate and refine an emerging theory. The criteria for the initial sample was as follows:

- I limited my study to Scotland, both for reasons of accessibility and cost, and so that the research was conducted within the context of a uniform legislative framework.
- I chose to interview local authority social workers (at main or senior grade) who had had case management responsibility for a case involving sibling sexual behaviour. Local authority social workers have the responsibility to make decisions as to whether or not the State should intervene in private and family life, and their decisions are often accepted routinely by other professionals who may be involved in working with the family.
- I defined sibling sexual behaviour as any sexual behaviour taking place between full or half siblings under the age of sixteen. The definition was kept broad as I wanted to understand from their perspective how social workers made sense of the behaviour. I limited the study to full or half siblings under the age of 16 in order to provide clarity over parental rights and responsibilities and the social worker’s responsibility to uphold Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, namely the child’s right to preserve their identity and family relations without unnecessary and unlawful interference.

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- The siblings may or may not have been living together at the time the sexual behaviour took place.
- The social worker should no longer be working with the case, or the case should be resolved, insofar as long-term decisions having already been taken whereby the social worker was confident that no ongoing concerns remained about any sexual behaviour taking place between the siblings. This may be because the siblings had been separated with no prospect of contact between them during childhood, because it had been deemed safe enough for the siblings to remain living together, to return to live together, or other possibilities in between. In light of my previous professional experience and potential perceived expertise, I thought it was important not to become involved while substantial decisions about living and contact arrangements were still being made because the interview might influence the very process I was trying to study.

When intending to explore only reunification decision making, the sample criteria stipulated cases where a decision had been taken to separate the siblings by removing one of them from the home or by stopping contact following the sibling sexual behaviour. This criterion was removed to extend the sample when participants proved difficult to recruit.

Based upon the latest figures from the continuation of Hutton and Whyte’s (2006) study, now comprising 496 children with harmful sexual behaviour who attend specialist services in Scotland, 129 (26%) had abused a sibling (Schinkel, 2012). I had some confidence that I would be able to recruit around 25 to 30 participants with a range of cases. A break-down of the figures by local authority led me initially to approach five authorities for approval to recruit social workers for the study. These authorities had the highest rates of sibling sexual abuse recorded and might provide the best chance of yielding participants.

A number of barriers then hindered my ability to follow a theoretical sampling strategy as I had intended. Recruiting participants proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. One authority denied the request on the basis of the demands on staff time. I was granted approval by the other four authorities and I established a central person within each to distribute an advertisement for participation in the research via e-mail address lists and staff newsletters. This proved largely ineffective. As discussed earlier the initial sample criteria related solely to reunification decision making. Only one social worker responded to the early recruitment e-mails, whose case involved siblings who had remained living together and who was therefore ineligible. Feedback from the local authority social workers with whom I maintain contact suggested that staff were so overloaded with work that an anonymous e-mail of this nature could easily be discarded in favour of other priorities. I therefore identified a senior figure from each authority who would be willing to give personal endorsement to the research and asked if e-mails could be sent in their name and with encouragement for social workers to become involved. I am certain that my credibility resulting from my previous work experience was instrumental in gaining their agreement to do so, as Roesch-Marsh et al. (2011) similarly discuss in relation to the role of identity in negotiating research access. Nonetheless no further social workers responded for the first three months.

I then extended the research criteria to include cases where the siblings may not have been separated as a result of the sibling sexual behaviour, and pursued a number of other strategies to try to recruit participants. I advertised the research via the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) website, and similarly the website for the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN, now WithScotland). Following a suggestion from IRISS I developed a website for the research so that their advert could provide brief information and provide a link to my website. To promote awareness of the research I attended local authority practice team meetings and a meeting of a Scotland-wide group of senior managers and practitioners who gather to share, discuss and promote good policy and practice. None of these methods was particularly effective and I asked the senior figure from

each authority to send out further recruitment e-mails, an example of which is given in Appendix 6. These further e-mails started to generate a response. One participant volunteered having attended a seminar at which I promoted the research, and in those authorities where there was a specialist service working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour, I used my professional contacts to ask if they could identify local authority social workers with whom they had worked and could make personal contact to suggest involvement in the study. This yielded several participants. I approached two further local authorities, and once I had met with participants, some suggested other social workers to take part in the study, but this process of ‘snowballing’ (Robson, 2002) was very limited.

As a result of the difficulties in recruitment my sampling strategy changed from theoretical sampling to convenience sampling, in Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) words, ‘taking whatever I could get’. While this moves away from the desired grounded theory approach Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that the variations which naturally occur in the data still allow for comparative analysis, the key technique of data analysis in grounded theory.

### **3.2.7 A description of the final sample**

A final convenience sample of 21 social workers recruited between March 2012 and October 2013 from six local authorities in Scotland was interviewed in order to explore social worker decision making with respect to separation, contact, and reunification in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. 26 interviews were conducted, including two follow-up interviews over the telephone. Face-to-face interviews lasted between one hour and three and-a-half hours, totalling just under forty-five hours. The requirement for anonymity (see Ethics, below) prevents detailed descriptions of the local authorities, the participants, and the families they discussed. I will therefore provide just brief details.

The six local authorities vary in size and geography, and include three large, urban centres, two authorities comprising a mixture of towns, villages and rural areas, and one largely rural authority. Two of the 21 social workers interviewed were at senior

grade; three worked in Youth Justice and 18 worked in Children and Families departments. The sample included 16 women and five men. All 21 were White, with approximately two-thirds over the age of 40. The demographic characteristics of the sample of participants are broadly in keeping with those of social workers across the Scottish local authority workforce as of 2009. Appendix 7 provides more detail.

The social workers’ experience ranged from having been qualified for one year up to 27 years, with a mode of nine years. There is no consistent pattern of experience across the dimensions of numbers of years qualified, training received, and numbers of previous cases managed. Quantity of experience does not necessarily equate with quality of experience, and some social workers may have had relevant experience prior to becoming qualified. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions as to which social workers could be regarded as more or less experienced. The training that the social workers identified as relevant included introductory level training on the subjects of children with harmful sexual behaviour and children who have been sexually abused. The three youth justice social workers had each received more specialised training than the children and families social workers, including the use of a risk assessment tool such as AIM2 (Print et al., 2012), and training around the implementation of the Good Lives Model (e.g. Siegert et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2007), an intervention model originally developed for use with adult sex offenders but which has been adapted for use with children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour (Print, 2013). Most of the social workers had had some previous experience of cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, although not necessarily as case manager. A summary of the profiles of the participants is given in Appendix 8, which includes the pseudonyms of the participants for later reference along with information as to whether the social worker was allocated to work with the perpetrator, victim, or both children. If the behaviour was regarded as mutually initiated this is indicated, in both cases the social worker being allocated to both children involved. Most of the social workers were allocated to work with both (or all) children involved in the sibling sexual behaviour. Just three social workers had experience of working only with the child identified as the victim.

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Nine of the 21 social workers brought case files with them to the interview, and three social workers provided anonymised case information in advance. All but one of the social workers had had involvement with the cases they discussed within five years prior to the interview, the majority within two years, and nine continued to have some ongoing connection. The social worker who was the exception still had access to case file information but their active involvement in the case dated back more than ten years.

The participants discussed a total of 21 families, including 54 children involved in sibling sexual behaviour, 21 of whom could be regarded as perpetrators of the behaviour. There were three examples of sibling sexual behaviour being regarded as mutually initiated. Some perpetrators were also victims of sibling sexual behaviour, and there were occasions when the sibling sexual behaviour involved more than two children. It was not always clear whether the sexual behaviours involving more than two children took place at the same time as a group or in separate pairings. The social workers referred loosely to ‘cases’, by which they usually meant ‘families’, and I will also use the term loosely. However, as there were some families within which more than one pairing or grouping of sibling sexual behaviour took place, I will also use the term ‘grouping’ to refer to pairings or groupings of sibling sexual behaviour insofar it is known which combination of children was involved. It could be said that the social workers discussed 26 groupings.

A commitment to safeguard the anonymity of the children and families precludes providing detailed information. The ages of the children involved in sibling sexual behaviour ranged from one to 15 years, with a variety of age differences and types of sexual behaviour involved. A summary of some features of the groupings the social workers discussed is provided in Appendix 9. This table also indicates which participants discussed which groupings. Fiona and Ruth were interviewed together, both having had contemporaneous involvement with the family they discussed. Penny and Sharon were also interviewed together, having consecutive involvement

with the family. Brian and Angela were interviewed separately, having consecutive involvement with the family they discussed.

### **3.2.8 Data analysis**

I based my data analysis methods as far as possible on those recommended by Charmaz (2006). Rather than generating all the data and leaving analysis to the end, following a grounded theory methodology I analysed data as an ongoing process, with further data generation becoming more refined to explore the theoretical ideas that began to emerge.

Interviews were first transcribed using some basic conventions drawn from ten Have (1999), but simplified here in order to facilitate reading of the extracts. A glossary of transcript symbols is provided in Appendix 10. Having transcribed an interview I read it through twice, highlighting words, phrases, or passages that I found to be of interest, “pawing” the transcript (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) to get a feel for the data (Thompson, 2002). I prepared a précis of each interview to summarise the main content for reference at a later stage. I then proceeded to coding using computer-assisted data analysis software (QSR NVivo version 9, later upgraded to version 10). Not having an “empty head”, I needed to work hard to keep “an open mind” (Dey, 1999:251). Coar and Sim (2006) caution that the familiarity of the insider may dominate the process of analysis and prevent novel insights. I therefore followed Charmaz (2006) and undertook some initial coding of the interview line-by-line and segment-by-segment, coding with gerunds and *in vivo* as much as possible in order to stay close to the data and to begin my analysis from the perspective of the participant, thereby trying to avoid forcing my own preconceived ideas. Charmaz (2006) recommends this initial coding be carried out with speed and spontaneity, but I found this rather to contradict line-by-line coding, which I found to be a slow process. I struggled initially between coding which was too descriptive, and analytic codes which imposed my own judgements. Coding the social workers’ experiences and actions was easier and more in keeping with the methodology than coding the social workers’ opinions and descriptions of events.

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Below is a short extract from the first interview I conducted, which illustrates how I coded the interview line-by-line.

Focused Coding	Extract	Line-by-line coding
<p><del>Characterising the behaviour as inappropriate</del></p> <p>Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse</p>	<p>I’m not sure that I would ever use the word abusive, even though I would have known that it was, which is interesting isn’t it? But I almost get, like you think of the word abusive and you almost. I don’t know, I mean, god, it was abusive, but I think inappropriate would have been the word that would have been used.</p>	<p>Not using the word abusive</p> <p>Knowing the behaviour was abusive</p> <p>Not knowing why not to use the word abusive</p> <p>Being clear the behaviour was abusive</p> <p>Using the term inappropriate to describe the behaviour</p>

**Figure 3-1: Example of line-by-line and focused coding**

In this short extract we can see how I coded each line of data with gerunds, and I proceeded in this fashion when transcribing this and the other interviews. Coding in this way produced over 1000 codes after just three interviews. Charmaz (2006) recommends writing spontaneous and informal memos from the outset, and I wrote a memo having coded this first interview. I reflected on the difficulties I was having with the coding process as outlined above, and started to develop some initial ideas about the decision making processes that were taking place. For example, I noted that there seemed to be a context of considerable uncertainty, occasions when the family made their own decisions, and when the social worker was under pressure from the family to make certain decisions. A copy of this memo is provided in Appendix 11.

Having coded the interview line-by-line and written this memo, I returned to the interview and progressed to focused coding, sifting through the codes to select those which seemed significant, with most analytic value, and which synthesised and explained larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). To take further the example given in Figure 1 above, at this stage I noted that the participant had given details of multiple abuse and changes in family configuration, yet described the family as



“stable”. I had coded this as “Characterising the family as stable”. Observing the discrepancy between the participant “knowing the behaviour was abusive” and “using the term ‘inappropriate’ to describe the behaviour”, I coded this segment similarly as “Characterising the behaviour as inappropriate”, and began to develop a category called “Characterising”, again writing a memo to capture its meaning, function, and properties. However, following Bazeley’s (2007) advice I kept rehearsing the codes, refining them, re-coding and uncoding, and going back through an interview again if a new code emerged that might be relevant to material earlier in the interview. This iterative process became more pronounced as I analysed further interviews, and in a later interview another participant also seemed to go through a process of ‘knowing’ that the behaviour was abusive but wanting to label it as ‘experimentation’. Returning to the first interview and comparing these two examples, ‘characterising’ did not seem adequately to capture the tension between ‘knowing’ that the behaviour was abusive and ‘wanting’ to label it differently. Maintaining a flexible approach to my coding (Charmaz, 2006), I recoded the segments with a new focused code, “Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse”, removed this from the category “Characterising”, other material in this category also eventually becoming dispersed in a similar way.

In keeping with the core analytic strategy within grounded theory methodology of ‘constant comparison’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006), I searched for other examples of the sibling sexual behaviour being labelled within the interview and across different interviews, to see whether there was any pattern to the circumstances in which the behaviour was labelled as abuse and when it was given other labels. Amongst other things, it emerged from this process of comparative analysis that the participants were less likely to resist labelling the behaviour as abuse when speaking about the victim, when allocated to work only with the victim, and when the perpetrator was regarded as the kind of child who might abuse other children. Labelling the behaviour as abuse was more strongly resisted when the participant worked with the perpetrator and when the perpetrator was a younger child. Again following Charmaz’s (2006) advice, I wrote a

memo on the code “Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse”, which is provided in Appendix 12. Charmaz (2006) suggests writing memos in whatever style works for the researcher. They can be formal, informal, handwritten or typed, and Charmaz (2006) recommends being playful, trying out ideas to make sense of the data. I recorded my memos as part of my research journal, and they tended to remain informal, a space to work out ideas and record comparisons between cases and between incidents. By way of further illustration, a memo on the subject of parents’ engaging with social work is provided in Appendix 13. In hindsight, writing these memos as discrete documents would have made them easier to track, and developing them into more formal prose, which more fully elaborated the categories, may have helped to refine my ideas at an earlier stage.

I have used “Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse” as one example of a focused code to illustrate the process of moving from initial to focused coding, and to show how constant comparative analysis helped to develop the dimensions of the code. The rest of my data analysis proceeded similarly. Following Bazeley’s (2007) advice to review and reflect on codes regularly, I printed off code lists, reviewed the data stored at each code and recoded and uncoded as necessary, consolidating the data under a smaller number of focused codes.

After conducting interviews with eight participants I took three months away from data generation to transcribe and analyse the data in order to inform my later interviews. By this time I had developed about 150 focused codes and needed to start to make more sense of how these codes related to each other, and to begin to distil them down to a smaller number of more analytically powerful categories. I found moving from focused coding to a higher level of theoretical abstraction particularly challenging. I accepted the arguments made by Glaser (1992) and Dey (1999), that Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) method of axial coding, while attractive to a novice researcher such as myself by providing a clear coding framework, risked forcing the data. Equally, Dey (1999) argues that Glaser’s (1978) method of theoretical coding clouds the idea of emergence, and comes from a positivist position whereby substantive codes are assumed to be atheoretical and free from the researcher’s

interpretation. Instead, as a way to “weave the fractured story back together” (Glaser, 1978:72), I undertook a mapping and clustering exercise (Charmaz, 2006). Having printed off the list of codes to review and consolidate them as before, and as a variation on Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) technique of cutting and sorting quotes, I cut out the focused code names and experimented with mapping them in relation to each other, grouping some codes together as categories which expressed similar ideas or were closely connected, exploring possible relationships between categories. A photograph of my first mapping and clustering exercise is provided in Appendix 14. At this early stage it became clear that uncertainty and complexity were themes which threaded through all of the social workers’ accounts, and I began to develop a theory that the social workers’ decision making could be considered as strategies to manage and simplify this uncertainty and complexity. These strategies included “Characterising” as way to simplify complex and contradictory information, “Maintaining the status quo” when there was insufficient information or time to make sense of the information to change existing plans, and “Taking sides” with one party or another when it was difficult to know how to make sense of which child’s needs should be prioritised. I recorded a summary of my thoughts in a memo in my reflective journal, a copy of which is provided in Appendix 15.

In the interviews that followed, while maintaining the core interview schedule, I pursued some particular questions about uncertainty and complexity and the social workers’ responses. However, I began to doubt that ‘responding to uncertainty and complexity’ had sufficient explanatory power to account for the social workers’ decision making in this particular area of work. Uncertainty and complexity set the background and context for the decision making, but did not seem adequately to explain the decisions or to capture the particular nature of these cases. I continued throughout to ask myself “What is this data a study of?” (Charmaz, 2006:47) and intermittently undertook further mapping exercises and memo-writing as new categories emerged and came into the foreground, while others receded into the background during the process of further data generation and constant comparative analysis. I shifted codes between categories, reconfiguring the structure and

relationships between categories. Charmaz (2006) is very clear that theory generation is not a linear process, and that undertaking mapping and clustering exercises, then writing about them, recording ideas about codes and relationships between codes, is intrinsic to constructivist grounded theory methods and a crucial activity to raise focused codes to more conceptual codes. In particular, new ideas and insights about the data are generated through writing. I found that writing at length about the emerging theory helped to make connections and to make connections differently, and also that talking through the emerging ideas helped to distil them down to some key components.

Returning to the example of “Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse”, through the process of mapping, memo writing and writing at greater length, I started to question more closely what the meaning of this process was. I made connections with other codes, such as “the perpetrator is a child, but the victim is the child”, an *in vivo* code I had previously included under the category “Taking sides”. Within the social workers’ accounts there seemed to be ideas expressed about what children are like, and what children are expected to be like. Children are ‘the’ child when a victim, but only ‘a’ child when a perpetrator. Whether behaviour was labelled as abuse seemed to be connected to the characteristics of the child rather than the characteristics of the behaviour. Participants seemed to resist labelling behaviour as abuse when the behaviour did not fit the participants’ expectations of what children are like. Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse might be a way to preserve an expectation, particularly of younger children, that they would not behave in abusive ways. I started therefore to experiment with clustering codes around expectations of children, and it soon followed to cluster codes around expectations of sibling children, and then expectations of parents.

My data analysis therefore consisted of an iterative process of initial and focused coding, memo-writing, constant comparison, mapping and clustering of focused codes, and further writing, throughout and beyond the process of data generation.

### **3.2.8.1 Theoretical saturation**

I arrived at my final interpretation of the data having completed my interviews and without the possibility of generating further data. Ideally further data generation would have taken place in order to feel more confident of reaching a point of saturation of the data. The idea of theoretical saturation remains elusive, however. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe theoretical saturation as the point in the research process when any new data do not help to develop the properties of the core categories, and where any gaps in theory are almost if not completely filled. Strauss and Corbin (1998) qualify this, noting that there is always the potential for something new to emerge and a line simply has to be drawn somewhere. Charmaz (2006) follows Dey’s (1999) argument that the term ‘saturation’ over-claims the potential of grounded theory, preferring instead the idea of “theoretical sufficiency” (Dey, 1999:257). From a constructionist perspective Furniss et al. (2011) regard the concept of saturation as particularly problematic in that data can always be reinterpreted in new ways. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006), I drew the line at a point where I had no more time within the limitations of the research to recruit more participants for the study, considering that the theory I had developed was based upon a large and varied dataset and was sufficient to account for most of the data generated. The later interviews had not added substantially to the theory.

### **3.2.9 Archiving**

Archiving the data with the UK data archive is encouraged by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for those doctoral research projects that they fund. One of the arguments made in favour of archiving the data is that it can add to the transparency of the research (Hammersley, 1997). It can allow the material to be re-examined, offering the possibility for different insights to be drawn from the data while helping to reduce the burden on participants (Heaton, 1998). A sense of academic community can be fostered by researchers sharing their data (Herrnson, 1995). All participants were given the option of reviewing the interview transcripts prior to giving consent for transcripts to be archived, and for one local authority this

was a condition of their permission to conduct the research. Some participants have not given consent and others have given consent subject to changes and deletions in order to protect their anonymity and that of the children and families discussed. It is intended to archive these selected and amended transcripts upon successful completion and examination of the thesis.

### **3.2.10 Ethics**

Approval was given for the study by the Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Sciences, and some of the participating local authorities also had an ethical approval process. Minor amendments to the research design were submitted for approval as the research developed. Written and verbal information was given to potential participants so that they could make an informed choice about whether or not to participate (Whittaker, 2009). Potential participants who responded to recruitment advertisements were provided with access to information via the research website, and a telephone call was arranged to give verbal information about the study, go over questions about anonymity and preparation for the interview, and to confirm eligibility. Written information about the research along with a consent form was sent out at this stage, and the key points were rehearsed at the beginning of each interview. A summary of this process is provided in Appendix 16. As Robson (2002) suggests, consent forms were signed prior to beginning to record the interview. It was agreed that participants could withdraw from the study up to three months after the interview. A time limit was given as it would be difficult to extract data and analysis of the data once the research was being written up. This time-limit was not applied rigidly. Two participants withdrew after the three month time period and their data was withdrawn and destroyed. The participants chose not to give any reason for withdrawal. It was made clear that the participants would need to describe cases without identifying the families. Pseudonyms were used and any unusual and identifying features of the case either withheld or modified. As participants discussed only cases where decisions had already been made and where they were confident that no concerns remained about the sibling sexual behaviour, it was most unlikely that any child protection

concerns would be raised that had not already been dealt with by the social worker. It was agreed that if the participant were to make a specific disclosure about unaddressed and ongoing child protection concerns I would work with them to talk this through with their line manager. This did not occur, but in two of the interviews the participants recognised patterns within the family history that they had not previously identified, raising additional concerns about the care of the children, which they wanted to follow up. Copies of the participant information and consent forms are provided in Appendices 17 and 18.

Sinding and Aronson (2003) comment that not all of the possible ethical considerations can be thought about or decided upon at the outset of the research; rather ethical research plays out in the details of its implementation and requires constant attention. In one interview a participant spoke about very personal information, and I chose to be as supportive as possible in hearing this story rather than focusing on my purpose to generate data. Both Goodrum and Keys (2007) and Charmaz (2006) make the point that one’s credibility as a person is ultimately more important than one’s credibility as a researcher. Checking that the participant is warm enough and otherwise comfortable forms part of the ethical conduct of the research, as well as ‘process consenting’ (Sinding and Aronson, 2003), asking if participants are happy to continue and to answer particular questions, rather than consent being completed at the signing of a document. Sinding and Aronson (2003) discuss the potentially exposing and unsettling effect interviews can have on participants, and the importance of reassuring participants of positive and valuable identities. I took their suggestion of sending (by post, handwritten) thoughtful, individual and validating thank you cards after the interview.

The importance of anonymity was foremost in my mind from the outset, and several participants sought reassurance that the families’ and their own anonymity would be respected. Anonymised interview data were stored separately from any identifying information in a locked cabinet (Whittaker, 2009). It was agreed that reporting of the study would include the unattributed comments of participants but would not include any specific identifiable information about participating local authorities,

participants, or the children and families participants discussed. No transcripts are therefore provided as part of this report and pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis. No payment or inducement was offered for participation other than the courtesy of refreshments. It was not anticipated that the research would cause any distress to the participants, but if by reflecting on their cases participants had concerns about the decisions they had made it was agreed they would be encouraged to speak with their line manager in supervision, as is usual practice.

### **3.3 Research design: Research question 3**

My third research question asked, “What policy and guidance is available to social workers to inform their decision making in this area?” Research to address this question was carried out concurrently with the research to address the first two research questions.

Decision making takes place within a wider organisational and policy context (Taylor, 2010), and in keeping with my aim of understanding decision making from the social workers’ perspective, I chose to explore the question of what policy and guidance is available to social workers by consulting those responsible for establishing the policy context within the social workers’ working environment, rather than approaching this as an independent exercise. I therefore approached senior managers within the participating local authorities who could speak to the policy and guidance they would expect to inform social workers when making decisions in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour.

#### **3.3.1 Recruitment**

I asked the central person established within each local authority to advertise the research to advise on a senior manager they thought would be best placed to respond to questions about the policy context, supplying an interview schedule to inform identification of the most appropriate person. A copy of the interview schedule is provided in Appendix 19. Sometimes a senior manager was identified very readily and at other times it required persistence.



### **3.3.2 Data generation**

Once an appropriate senior manager was identified the interview schedule was sent in advance to allow them time to think about what information could be made available and about the kinds of policies and other guidance they would expect to inform social workers when working in this area. The intention was to allow the informants the opportunity to provide a considered response in keeping with their role within the authority. I asked the informants if they could provide information about the numbers of cases referred to their authority involving concerns about children’s sexual behaviour and about sibling sexual behaviour specifically. While not expecting the information to be easily available I considered that if the information were available this could provide some useful context. Otherwise there were questions about the policy and guidance the informants would expect to inform social workers in cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour, and about decision making with respect to separation, contact and reunification more specifically. Finally there was space for any other comments the informants wished to make. It was anticipated that interviews would mainly involve relaying information and would not be expected to last more than about fifteen minutes. Informants could therefore choose whether to respond in person, via telephone, or e-mail.

A senior manager was identified to participate in five of the six authorities. Two of the informants were service managers in children and families departments; two had a lead role in the authority for child protection; and one was the manager of the local authority’s youth justice service. One of these interviews was conducted in person, three over the telephone, and one by e-mail.

### **3.3.3 Data Analysis**

The policy informants supplied details of policy and guidance which they expected to inform social workers working with cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, and which they expected to inform social workers when making separation, contact, and reunification decisions. I undertook a systematic close reading and re-

reading of this documentation, analysing the documents thematically according to the themes which emerged from interviews with the social workers, and looking for evidence of how these documents might indeed guide social workers when working with these cases and making decisions about sibling living and contact arrangements. Not all of the informants chose to make any additional comments. The comments that were made were grouped thematically.

### **3.3.4 Ethics**

Information about the study was provided in advance along similar lines to the social worker participants. Given the impersonal nature of the information being requested it was not felt necessary to request written consent; rather this was provided verbally or by virtue of an e-mail response. It was agreed that any comments and responses would not be reported in a way that would be attributable to the person or the authority unless the person specifically requested it.

## **3.4 Research design: Research questions 1, 2 and 3**

### **3.4.1 Validity and reliability**

Given my ontological and epistemological assumptions, ‘validity’ is a problematic concept as it implies a positivist notion of an objective reality that the findings of the research can be measured against (Yardley, 2000). The findings may not be reliable or repeatable (David and Sutton, 2004) in that they depend so much on the particular knowledge constructed between the participants and the biographically situated researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b). Rather than discussing validity and reliability, ‘credibility’ might be a more helpful concept for qualitative research in terms of providing sufficient information about methods to allow the findings to be trusted (Robson, 2002). Ultimately the credibility of the research will be judged according to the degree to which it is clear, transparent and open to criticism (Longino, 1990), and to the extent that its findings are seen to be useful and shareable (Douglas, 1971). Thinking very much along these lines, Yardley (2000) offers four criteria against which the quality of qualitative research may be measured: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and

coherence; and impact and importance. In considering the criteria for evaluating grounded theory specifically, Charmaz (2006) offers credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. There is a great deal of overlap between these two sets of criteria, and I will discuss originality, impact and usefulness after I have presented and discussed the findings.

I will make some comments on the other dimensions of credibility and quality which I sought to address through the research design. Firstly, while I cannot claim it has been achieved by design, I have sensitivity to the context within which social workers make their decisions from my experience as a social worker and senior practitioner. I have been immersed in the field of social work and sibling sexual behaviour for many years, showing a degree of commitment to the subject. As part of this sensitivity to context Yardley (2000) suggests that the research design should incorporate the anticipated effects of the researcher’s actions. I addressed this in the way that I constructed the interview schedule and conducted the interviews, as outlined above. This relates closely to the need to maintain reflexive awareness and to be open about positionality, which Yardley (2000) associates with transparency and Charmaz (2006) with credibility. I have already outlined the ways in which I have addressed reflexivity and have provided a statement of my position in relation to the research. Transparency and coherence has been demonstrated through the clear links made between research questions, philosophical perspective, and methods of inquiry (Yardley, 2000). In addition I have made clear and explicit the process of data generation and analysis, and will provide sufficient extracts from transcripts to allow the reader to form an independent assessment (Charmaz, 2006). Yardley (2000) states that one of the ways in which commitment and rigour can be demonstrated is through the achievement of an adequate sample size. Charmaz (2006) again refers to this under ‘credibility’. I have shown that through considerable effort a sample of sufficient size and variation was attained to enable evidence of meaningful comparison to be provided.

One of the questions Charmaz (2006) asks to establish resonance is whether the findings make sense to the participants and suggests taking ideas back to participants as a way of member-checking. Robson (2002) similarly offers member-checking as a way to demonstrate and enhance credibility, and suggests that this can be done face-to-face or via correspondence such as e-mail. Ideally the member-checking should take place face-to-face so that participants’ reactions can be gauged and a dialogue entered into (Charmaz, 2006). Due to the availability of participants in terms of both time and distance, I was not able to meet participants in person and instead sent a summary of my findings via e-mail for feedback and comment, which I will discuss in a later chapter on the strengths and limitations of the study. In addition I presented selected provisional findings for mixed academic and practitioner audiences on three occasions as I developed my analysis. The purpose of these presentations was primarily to learn from the questions and discussion the presentations elicited in order to develop my analysis of the data (therefore enhancing resonance and credibility), but it was also useful to gauge audience response in terms of whether the findings resonated with their experiences, and whether they were received as credible insofar as they were supported by the small amount of initial data analysis I was able to provide.

There were therefore a number of ways in which I sought to ensure the study’s quality and credibility, and I will return to some of these issues in the chapter summarising the strengths and limitations of the research.

### **3.4.2 Knowledge dissemination**

My aspiration from the outset of the research was to produce outcomes of practical relevance, and to explore opportunities to present my findings to, and engage in discussion with, practitioner as well as academic audiences.

Thus far I have given three presentations on different selections of my emergent findings to mixed audiences of post-graduate students, academic staff and practitioners, mainly as a way to gain feedback and refine my analysis, but also as a way to promote my research. I have agreed in principle to offer a half-day workshop

on the subject of my research at a practitioner event in the Autumn of 2015 and will continue to pursue similar opportunities, such as presenting at one of the University of Edinburgh Social Work seminars.

As a condition of permission to conduct the research within the participating local authorities it was agreed that I would provide a short summary of the findings following completion and successful examination of the thesis. I have offered to provide a similar summary to participants and to those who have supported the research in other ways. I intend to publish articles on selected findings in practitioner-read peer-reviewed journals such as *Child Abuse Review*, *Child Abuse and Neglect* and the *British Journal of Social Work*. WithScotland, “a national resource supporting professionals working with children and adults at risk of harm and abuse” ([withscotland.org](http://withscotland.org)), encourages the production of short peer-reviewed briefing papers. These briefing papers are said to be very accessible to social work practitioners and are widely read. I have agreed in principle to write one of these briefing papers upon successful examination of the thesis on the subject of sibling sexual behaviour, which could incorporate the key messages from my research.

### **3.5 Conclusions and Reflections**

I chose to explore social worker decision making with respect to separation, contact and reunification in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. In keeping with a subtle realist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, I adopted an abductive research strategy, thereby exploring the subject from the perspective of the social workers themselves. Following a constructivist grounded theory methodology I interviewed social workers retrospectively about cases for which they had had case management responsibility, tracing the cases from start to finish and exploring the decision making along the way. In tandem, I consulted senior managers in order to establish the local and national policy context and undertook an analysis of the policy documentation they identified.

I used computer-assisted data analysis software to manage the volume of data I expected to generate. This meant I could code to all sorts of different places at once and across multiple dimensions. Retrieving and keeping connections with the interview data was facilitated by the use of the software. Many authors cite this facility to manage large amounts of data as a distinct advantage of computer software such as NVivo over manual methods (e.g. Gibbs et al., 2002; Thompson, 2002; Lewins and Silver, 2007). However, as well as NVivo freeing me up from some tedious mechanical tasks, it also created others and there were ways in which the software inhibited a more creative and imaginative approach to data analysis. Sometimes it was too easy to code to different locations without needing to think more carefully about where a segment of data belonged and therefore keeping categories more differentiated and defined. Weeks of meticulous recoding and uncoding were required. With the data fractured so finely into large numbers of codes and categories, NVivo did not support an overview of the whole dataset. I therefore deployed manual mapping and clustering methods alongside computer-assisted methods in order to make sense of the data. While I would repeat my use of manual methods, on another occasion I might not take line-by-line coding quite so literally.

For future studies I would also aim to be more meticulous in writing memos as discrete documents rather than as part of a reflexive journal, which would enable them to be easier to track and develop. While not wishing to stifle the spontaneity and creativity which Charmaz (2006) recommends, writing memos more formally and delineating the dimensions of categories at an earlier stage may have been helpful. There were some details of the research design which I could have thought through more clearly. I chose to interview senior managers as people who would be responsible for establishing the policy context. While I may well have ended up with the same people, I recruited according to who was best placed to answer the interview questions rather than according to who was responsible for establishing the policy context. It may have been a useful addition to think about who else establishes this context, such as the managers of practice teams.

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Implementing a pure grounded theory methodology would have involved interviewing social workers about their experiences of these cases without particular research questions in mind, the research questions emerging from the areas of concern identified by the participants. Theoretical sampling proved unachievable due to the unexpected difficulties in recruiting participants. However, I was guided by grounded theory methods in the way that I approached the interviews and in the way that I analysed the data in tandem with data generation. In particular, I deployed the method of constant comparative analysis, one of the key techniques of grounded theory methodology. Having an intention to study decision making rather than solely the social workers’ experiences sometimes made the coding process difficult. However, the requirement to work towards a theory grounded in the data helped to look much more deeply at the data than I think would have been the case had I decided to conduct a thematic analysis. While I did not take a purist approach, I feel justified in stating that my research is a grounded theory study.





## Chapter 4: The context of policy and uncertainty

### 4.1 Introduction

In the literature review I described the extra complexity of cases where a child in the family is the source of abuse or risk to another child in the family. When making decisions in these cases social workers have to take into account the conflicting needs of both or all siblings involved, and they may be in the position of deciding the extent to which one child’s needs should take priority over another’s. Sexual behaviour between siblings raises an unusual problem for social workers in potentially having to choose between the needs of two or more children. There is little legislation to steer these decisions, and in this chapter introducing my findings I will show that there is limited policy which social workers can draw upon to guide their decision making. In addition, these cases are often fraught with uncertainty in terms of, for example, what actually happened between the siblings, how to interpret the behaviour, the impact of the behaviour, and the risks of future behaviour occurring. Balancing the needs and risks of two children in the context of such uncertainty is hugely challenging, as one of the social worker participants, Jenny<sup>2</sup>, remarks:

What was good for one young person was maybe not good for the other, and then how as two different professional teams, how do you work that out, while balancing risk, and need, and the fact that you actually £don’t know what’s gone on in the first place£. I mean it was just a mess. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

Despite such considerable uncertainty and limited guidance, social workers have to make decisions anyway. In this chapter I will explore in more detail my findings regarding the context of policy and uncertainty, before introducing the model I have

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<sup>2</sup> To re-iterate, pseudonyms have been used throughout when referring to participants and to the children and families the social workers discussed

developed, which theorises the basis upon which social workers make decisions ‘anyway’.

## **4.2 Policy and Guidance**

To recapitulate, I interviewed senior managers from five of the participating local authorities in order to ascertain the extent to which sibling sexual behaviour was a concern commonly encountered by social workers, and to establish the policy context for this area of work.

### **4.2.1 Incidence of cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour**

I asked the policy informants how many cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour and how many involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour had been referred to their authority over the preceding 12 months. Four of the five policy informants said that this level of information was not kept by their local authority. The fifth informant said that they might be able to extract this information from their databases, but the considerable amount of work involved would not be justified by the nature of the research.

One informant estimated that their authority would deal with ten or eleven sexual offences perpetrated by children under the age of 18 per year, and that only a very small proportion of these would involve siblings as victims. Another estimated that their local authority would not be likely to deal with more than one case of concerning sibling sexual behaviour per year. However, this informant contacted me again subsequent to the interview, having gathered some statistical information from the local police. The police reported that over a 12-month period between October 2012 and September 2013 there had been 18 solved crimes involving sexual offences committed by children under the age of 18, three of which involved siblings as victims. The police noted that the accuracy of these figures depended upon complete and correct data entry both in terms of the offender and their relationship to the victim. One policy informant also commented that the police may require a higher threshold of evidence and seriousness before they would charge a child for offences

against a sibling, on the basis that they would not wish to put a child in the position of having to give evidence against a sibling in court. The police figures are therefore likely to underestimate the number of cases that have come to the attention of social work involving concerns about a child’s sexual behaviour towards their sibling.

From these limited figures it seems likely that local authorities deal with only a small number of cases involving sibling sexual behaviour per year, although more than is estimated by senior managers. Most of the social workers involved in the study similarly reported that concerns about sibling sexual behaviour were uncommon, but a surprising number reported previous involvement in cases of this nature. Taking the police figures and the social workers’ reports together, it is likely that many more cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour have been dealt with by the local authorities than are reflected in the numbers of social workers who have volunteered to participate in this research. It is also possible that the victim being a sibling is not registered as an issue of significance in cases involving children’s harmful sexual behaviour. A substantial piece of research would be needed to collate reliable figures about the incidence of cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour that does not attract a police charge.

The main purpose of the interviews with senior managers was to establish the policy context for working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, and it is to this policy context that I will now turn.

#### **4.2.2 Policy and guidance findings**

In terms of the policy and guidance that the policy informants would expect social workers to consult and to be of assistance in making decisions in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, four of the five policy informants referred to Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and to local child protection procedures. Three informants referred to the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2010b) and to local risk management protocols. One informant referred to Keeping Children Safe (The Scottish Government and

Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, 2011) and the Stop it Now! website.

While I analysed these documents thematically, my findings are structured according to the documents for ease of reading.

#### **4.2.2.1 Getting it Right for Every Child**

The informants did not state explicitly which particular pieces of GIRFEC documentation they were referring to, and I chose to read the Guide to GIRFEC (Scottish Government, 2012) and the document entitled “Getting it right for children and young people who present a risk of serious harm” (The Scottish Government, 2008). GIRFEC is Scottish Government policy which aims to provide a consistent approach and framework for anyone working with children and families, and to help practitioners “focus on what makes a positive difference for children” (The Scottish Government, 2012:6). The principles and values of the GIRFEC approach are intended to be “threaded through all existing policy, practice, strategy and legislation affecting children, young people and their families.” (The Scottish Government, 2012:6). The GIRFEC approach provides a practice model, which is built around eight well-being indicators (Being safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included) and an assessment framework (the ‘My World Triangle’) for practitioners to structure their understanding of the child’s needs and any risks to which they may be exposed, defining needs and risks as “two sides of the same coin” (The Scottish Government, 2012:14). This policy is expected to underpin all areas of child care practice.

Throughout the Guide to GIRFEC the position is taken that children have needs which require to be met in order to grow, develop, and achieve their potential. Children may sometimes be exposed to risks from others, these others typically being adults and usually parents or carers. Of all the needs which require to be met, the Guide to GIRFEC stresses that safety is the priority:

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All agencies in touch with children and young people must play their part in making sure that young people are healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, included and, above all, safe. (The Scottish Government, 2012:11)

GIRFEC defines safety as involving both emotional and physical safety:

Emotional and physical safety is fundamental and is wider than child protection. (The Scottish Government, 2012:8)

There is one mention of the possibility of children themselves presenting a risk to others through a reference on page 17 of this 27-page document to offending behaviour. This is in the context of discussing strengths and pressures in the child’s world, the implication being that any offending behaviour would suggest a pressure, an unmet need, and a response to try to meet that need would be indicated.

The Guide to GIRFEC does not provide guidance on how to work with a situation where a child presents risks to other children, and does not offer any specific direction with regards to sibling placement and contact, or to a situation where two children’s needs are in conflict. The guide is relevant to working with cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings insofar as it implies the view that whatever the role the child played in the behaviour they are a child with needs which require to be met just like any other.

“Getting it right for children and young people who present a risk of serious harm” (The Scottish Government, 2008), hereinafter referred to as ‘GIRFEC for children who present risk’, provides a framework for agencies to evaluate their performance and capacity for working with children who present high risk in terms of both sexual and violent behaviour. It is not designed to provide guidance for making decisions in particular practice situations.

The document clearly states its position that children who present risks will have complex needs themselves and that the Guide to GIRFEC would therefore be as relevant to working with these as any other children:

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Action should be directed at ensuring that children and young people are healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, safe, included, respected and responsible. This approach applies to all children and young people across the spectrum of need, including those who are most at risk either to themselves or others. (The Scottish Government, 2008:4)

For the most part the document suggests that any risks these children may present will be to the wider public, rather than to other children within the family. There is one mention on page of 5 of the need to reduce risks “for the community, staff, and the child or young person and their family”; otherwise the document refers to risks “to the community” (page 9), to “public safety” (page 10), with no mention of siblings or suggestions for safety planning within the family.

The document presents a variety of different terms to describe the sexual behaviour displayed by children who present risks, including “sexually harmful behaviour” (pages 3 and 8); “sexually inappropriate behaviour” (page 7) and “sexually problematic behaviour” (page 55). There is a distinction made between sexually harmful behaviour broadly and sexual offending specifically, but otherwise it is unclear which terms might best be used in which contexts, or if the terms are simply interchangeable. The document suggests that sexual behaviour may only be harmful if it is repeated:

Due to the complex nature of this subject there is no definition of the type of behaviour that should be considered problematic and, if continued, presents a risk of harm. (The Scottish Government, 2008:55)

The document gives some indicators to differentiate normal from “problematic” sexual behaviour, including use of force, bribes or other coercion; a lack of or inability to give consent; dynamics of fear, secrecy, confusion or intimidation; and a preoccupation with sexual issues. Otherwise the document does not provide guidance which would assist social workers in making decisions about living or contact arrangements in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour.

#### 4.2.2.2 The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland

I was given access to the local child protection procedures for two local authorities, both of which were very similar in structure and content to the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2010b). This has since been updated (The Scottish Government, 2014b) and is hereinafter referred to as the ‘National Guidance’. I will focus my comments on the updated National Guidance, which provides a framework within which local agencies and individuals can agree the processes through which they can work together to protect children in their area. It sets out the legislative framework underpinning child protection practice in Scotland and addresses the key definitions and principles by which different agencies and practitioners can be clear about their individual and shared roles and responsibilities. It stresses that child protection “must be seen within the wider context of supporting families and meeting children’s needs through GIRFEC” (The Scottish Government, 2014b:20). The National Guidance offers direction with regards to recognising and responding to child protection concerns and serves as a resource on specific areas of practice, such as children with harmful sexual behaviour.

The National Guidance echoes the Guide to GIRFEC in placing child safety as the priority above the other well-being indicators:

The primary indicator for child protection is to keep a child **safe** and, in so doing, attention is given to other areas of well-being as appropriate. (The Scottish Government, 2014b:4, emphasis in original)

When considering the need for risk assessment after a single event, the National Guidance states:

In some child protection circumstances, urgent action is needed to protect the child from any further harm and the immediate safety of the child is the priority consideration. Where such concerns arise and can be immediately verifiable – for example, sexual assault or injury – risk assessment must be carried out straight away in order to guarantee the child’s safety. (The Scottish Government, 2014b:83)

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This quote suggests that immediate safety is the priority in child protection work. Sexual assault would be regarded as a case where a single incident would require an urgent assessment to ‘guarantee’ the child’s immediate safety. The National Guidance does not define the term ‘safety’, but implies that immediate physical rather than emotional safety is the priority. ‘Significant harm’, however, is defined on page 13 to include impairment to the child’s health or physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development.

Most of the explicit references in the 2010 guidance to risks being presented to children by adults, and specifically by parents or carers, have been removed in the 2014 version. However, throughout most of the document the implication remains that children are likely to be at risk rather than present risk, and that risks will come from adults, probably parents. For example:

Parents, carers or other[s] with parental responsibilities should be invited to the [Child Protection Case Conference]. They need clear information about practitioners’ concerns if they are to change behaviour which puts the child at risk. (The Scottish Government, 2014b:105)

Consideration of the involvement of the child should take cognisance of...the risks they have been placed at. (The Scottish Government, 2014b:109)

On pages 50 and 53 of this 190-page document the National Guidance briefly acknowledges that children may sometimes present a risk to others and that youth justice staff can help to assess and intervene in those circumstances. Between pages 127-129, however, there is a specific section on children who display “harmful or problematic sexual behaviour” (The Scottish Government, 2014b:127). There is acknowledgement of the difficulty for practitioners of differentiating between ‘inappropriate’, ‘experimental’ and ‘abusive’ behaviour, and despite using a variety of undefined terms, the Guidance recommends that risk management plans be based upon “shared definitions and language” (The Scottish Government, 2014b:128).



The National Guidance advises that the underlying causes of the behaviour may indicate that child protection procedures should be followed with respect to both the victim and the perpetrator, highlighting the potential vulnerability of perpetrators.

The National Guidance makes no specific mention of siblings but advises that the safety needs of both the victim and perpetrator should be addressed, and that a risk assessment should be carried out to determine whether the perpetrator can remain in the family home. It recommends that safety plans be drawn up wherever the perpetrator is living. The National Guidance therefore implies that decisions around living arrangements should be made around risk, but does not outline how these risk assessments should be carried out. It does, however, recommend that further information is sought from the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, the Handbook of Clinical Intervention for Young People who Sexually Abuse (O'Reilly et al., 2004), and the Framework for risk assessment, management and evaluation (FRAME) (The Scottish Government, 2011).

#### **4.2.2.3 FRAME**

FRAME (The Scottish Government, 2011) sets out five benchmarks for good risk practice with respect to young people who present a high risk to others, including children with harmful sexual behaviour. It stresses that these children should not be approached as ‘mini-adults’; rather they should be regarded as vulnerable children who may require protection according to the principles espoused by GIRFEC and the National Guidance, as well as the risks they present “within the community” needing to be managed (The Scottish Government, 2011:9). A number of references are made to risks within the community, with no mention of siblings or risks within the family. FRAME recommends a formulation approach to assessing risk and need, with professional judgement being supported by appropriate risk assessment tools. Risk management plans should be proportionate and responsive to changes in risk levels, promoting the child’s development as far as possible. It suggests that those responsible for risk assessment and decision making should be appropriately qualified, trained, skilled and competent. A young person’s risk management plan should include victim safety planning to reduce the likelihood and impact of

psychological as well as physical harm, but otherwise FRAME does not provide any specific assistance with making decisions about sibling living or contact arrangements following sibling sexual behaviour.

#### **4.2.2.4 The National Youth Justice Practice Guidance**

There is no specific chapter on sibling sexual behaviour in O'Reilly et al.'s (2004) handbook, although the possibility of siblings being victims is mentioned, such as on pages 315 and 335 in the chapter on working with families (Thomas, 2004). A chapter is devoted to distinguishing between normative and non-normative sexual behaviour in preadolescent and adolescent children (Araji, 2004). There is no particular guidance to assist social workers making decisions about sibling living and contact arrangements following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour.

The National Youth Justice Practice Guidance (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013) contains one chapter on Managing High Risk (Chapter 7), which includes material on children who display harmful sexual behaviour. The chapter acknowledges the different and sometimes confusing terminology used within this field. It offers some indicators to differentiate normal from harmful sexual behaviour by providing Calder's (1999:2) definition of children with harmful sexual behaviour, as:

young people who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a sexual exploitation. (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013:Chapter 7, page 6)

It refers readers to the National Guidance on Under-Age Sexual Activity (The Scottish Government, 2010a), which elaborates on these pointers. This latter document makes no mention of sexual activity within sibling relationships. In an appendix a list of questions is given to guide the differentiation between normative and non-normative sexual behaviour, including whether the child was under the age of 13; whether they did or were able to give consent to the activity; whether there

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was a coercing power imbalance in the relationship; whether any coercion was used; whether there were any attempts made to secure secrecy; and whether one of the children involved was in a position of trust.

Chapter 7 of the National Youth Justice Practice Guidance does explicitly acknowledge that children may sexually abuse their siblings and suggests that practitioners be careful not to minimise the harm caused by this behaviour. Comprehensive assessment is advised in cases of sibling sexual abuse, with attention paid to sibling dynamics and considerable work undertaken with family members. In an appendix to the chapter a checklist from a local authority risk management protocol is quoted (McCarlie, 2009), which provides guidance on decision making as to whether or not a child with harmful sexual behaviour can remain living in the family home while assessment work is carried out. It states that such placement decisions should take account of:

- Victims and potential victims living in household
  - Level of co-operation by parents
  - Level of sharing concern by parents/ caregivers
  - Ability to work alongside agencies (openness, honesty)
  - Level of culpability/ability to protect
  - Risk awareness
  - Ability to identify and meet needs
  - Ability to employ risk management strategies
  - Level of alienation of young person in family home
  - Threats of retribution to young person
  - Known history of abuse in family home
- (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013:Chapter 7, pages 39-40)

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The appendix also includes suggestions for issues to consider in the development of a home safety plan:

Establishing (where viable) home safety agreements to monitor and supervise the young person and protect victims. This might include: separate sleeping arrangements; privacy rules; increased parental checks; restrictions on children being alone together when unsupervised; limits on horseplay and wrestling; monitoring TV, video, computer and mobile phone access; and expectations around dress. (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013:Chapter 7, page 40)

There is no specific guidance on decision making around sibling contact and family reunification, but a section on family action plans implies many of the therapeutic goals that might be expected to be reached in order to achieve reunification. This includes supporting parents to understand abusive behaviour and its effects; being able to support both the victim and perpetrator; interrupting abusive family patterns; increasing parental protective capacity; and renegotiating family relationships when a return home is not possible in order to maintain the family as a continued source of support.

#### **4.2.2.5 Local risk management protocols**

I reviewed the local protocols of three of the participating local authorities for the risk management of “children and young people with problematic sexual behaviours”. These protocols specifically address the risks which may be presented by children and young people and set out the processes and framework for managing risk at a multi-agency level. They provide guidance on how to identify problem sexual behaviours. These protocols were very similar in style, structure and content and I will combine my comments for all three.

There were strong statements that children with harmful sexual or violent behaviour are likely to have suffered significant trauma; therefore the perpetrators as well as the victims should be subject to child protection procedures.

Most of the content related to children sexually abusing other children outwith the family home. A case scenario was presented of a community offence, and extensive guidance was provided about risk management in schools. Five pages of guidance were included to assist in identifying “problem behaviours” and in defining behaviours. The behaviours were presented as ranging from ‘normal’ and then ‘inappropriate’ at one end of the spectrum, through to ‘abusive’ at the other end of the spectrum.

There was no explicit mention of sibling sexual abuse; however it was implied that siblings may be potential victims insofar as the protocols advised practitioners to consider victims and potential victims living in the household when deciding whether the perpetrator could remain at home. A checklist similar to that in the National Youth Justice Practice Guidance is provided to guide such decision making. Similar advice is also given on developing a home safety plan. There is no guidance related to sibling contact and reunification.

#### **4.2.2.6 Keeping Children Safe and Stop it Now! website**

One informant recommended seeking guidance from ‘Keeping Children Safe’ (The Scottish Government and Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, 2011) and the Stop-it-Now! website. Keeping Children Safe is a pamphlet providing information to anyone with a role in bringing up children, but is primarily aimed at parents and carers. It explains that children sometimes sexually abuse other children, outlining the warning signs and preventative action that can be taken. Stop it Now! is a project of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation which aims to stop sexual abuse by encouraging sexual abusers and potential abusers to seek help. It provides a helpline and has discrete branches in the different countries of the United Kingdom. Stop it Now! (Scotland) is funded by the Scottish Government. It provides information about child sexual abuse and sexual offending as well as providing and participating in projects to help prevent sexual abuse. The website contains a wealth of information on a range of topics mostly related to adult offending. I chose to look specifically at the booklet entitled “Child’s Play? Preventing abuse among children and young people” (Stop-it-Now!, no date given) as being the resource most likely to

be relevant to the subject of sibling sexual behaviour. This booklet was again aimed at parents and carers and was very similar in both language and content to Keeping Children Safe. I will combine my comments on both.

Both sources acknowledged clearly that children may be the perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Some guidance is offered on how to differentiate expected from concerning sexual behaviour, and possible explanations are given for abusive behaviour in terms of the child’s own experiences of abuse or trauma. Both documents focused on this abuse being of children outwith the household. It is not until page 14 of 20 in ‘Keeping Children Safe’ that it is remarked:

Sometimes the child or young person who presents a risk is a close family member or the son or daughter of a friend. (The Scottish Government and Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, 2011:14)

This identical sentence is used on page 11 of the 16-page “Child’s play?” pamphlet. This is the only suggestion that sometimes children may abuse their siblings.

#### **4.2.3 Summary**

The policy informants were inconsistent in their suggestions for sources of policy and guidance for social workers making decisions regarding cases involving sibling sexual behaviour. For those authorities without specific local risk management protocols it was necessary to follow a trail of suggestions for further reading in order to find guidance that was of particular relevance. The most helpful guidance was from youth justice, and it is noteworthy that the National Guidance on Child Protection suggested that youth justice staff could help with cases involving children presenting a risk to others. Within two of the local authorities I was directed initially towards youth justice teams as the most likely source of participants, yet 18 of the 21 participants came from children and families practice teams.

While the Guide to GIRFEC and the child protection policies acknowledge that children may sometimes present risks to others, it is generally maintained that children are at risk, and risk is likely to come from adults, principally parents and

carers. All of the policies take the position that children who harm others through their sexual behaviour should be regarded as children with needs, their behaviour being an indication of their level of need, and that the principles of GIRFEC should apply in responding to their needs. Where children present a risk it is implied and explicitly stated throughout most of the documents that these risks would be to the wider public. Risks from children within the family are rarely acknowledged, the National Youth Justice Practice Guidance being the main exception.

There is a wide range of terminology used in the documents to describe children’s sexual behaviour. The terms are rarely defined (the local risk management protocols being the exception) and are sometimes used interchangeably. There is a wealth of guidance available to help differentiate harmless from harmful sexual behaviour, most of this guidance being largely consistent. However, some documents suggest that repetition of the behaviour is necessary before it could be considered harmful. This contrasts with the child protection guidance on sexual assault by an adult, which states that a single incident requires urgent action to protect the child. The documents do not acknowledge that the criteria for differentiating children’s sexual behaviour may not apply in their entirety to siblings.

The documents are consistent in prioritising a child’s safety above other indicators of well-being. The GIRFEC documentation states that safety should include emotional safety, and that safety should be interpreted more widely than is the case in child protection, where the guidance stresses immediate safety.

There is some general advice within the documents, which may be applied to cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, such as the need to consider parenting capacity; to consider the reactions, wishes and feelings of the victim child; and to undertake “good, accurate risk assessment” (The Scottish Government, 2014b:79). Otherwise there is guidance within the Youth Justice Practice Guidance and local risk management protocols which could help social workers make decisions about whether not a child can remain living with their sibling following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour. There is also some guidance within these documents on

safety planning should the child remain living at home. There is no guidance within any of the documents to assist with decisions around sibling contact, but the Youth Justice Practice Guidance provides a list of family intervention goals, which could be used to inform reunification decisions, albeit that this is not explicitly stated.

#### **4.2.4 Comments by policy informants**

I asked informants whether there were any general comments they would like to make about working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour. Four of the five informants chose to make some comments, which I have summarised thematically.

Two of the informants commented that, as far as they were aware, there is little specific policy to guide decision making in these cases, and doubted the value of any such guidance. Instead, they suggested that decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis and through making effective relationships with parents and children, including seeking the family’s views:

And I think, to be honest that’s probably quite reasonable, erm, because I think decisions about whether or not individual sets of siblings should be erm reunified, would be very much an individual decision. You know, because every single situation is different. (Informant 1)

I mean it’s not the kind of thing you can proceduralise or, or tick any boxes, it has to be reflective and it has to take into account the perspectives of the children and the adults in the situation and it has to be done on a multi-agency basis...The key to it will be relationships and us making effective relationships with children and parents and knowing what we’re on about so that we can keep everybody safe. (Informant 2)

All four of the policy informants stressed the importance of these decisions not being taken by individual social workers, but in consultation with more senior managers and in the context of multi-agency working:



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The multi-agency approach to that is correct whereby we’re not leaving social work practitioners in the dark or kind of floundering around by themselves to take these difficult decisions. (Informant 2)

In this context of shared decision making responsibility, two of the informants noted the importance of reflective practice, and the role others can play in helping to challenge assumptions and values. With respect to values, three of the four informants were clear that the children displaying harmful sexual behaviour should be supported as children with needs, the GIRFEC approach therefore being entirely applicable:

Whether we regard them as being a victim or perpetrator, you know, irrespective of that, they are children and the getting it right approach has to apply to that. (Informant 2)

So that there’s a context of recognising, understanding the level of risk that they present as an individual, but also recognising for some of those young people some of their needs are very complex and very complicated in themselves. (Informant 3)

Informant 3 stressed the importance of recognising that the child may have needs as well as present risks, a sentiment echoed by Informant 1, who viewed it as particularly challenging for social workers to respond from both perspectives simultaneously:

And I think that young person and that experience kind of helped me to understand, you know, the person and the behaviour. They’re one and the same, but they’re separate at the same time. And, I’m, I’m not sure that we always kind of remember both elements. Because actually that young person was very dangerous, but they were also very vulnerable... You’re bad or you’re sad. And, and you know, that actually you’re both. It’s something that’s really difficult (laughs) for people to...work with. (Informant 1)

Both of these informants also identified a reluctance by social workers to stigmatise children by labelling them as abusers, but this could sometimes have the effect of not referring them for specialist help at an early enough stage.

Finally, one informant commented that the impact of sibling sexual abuse may be significant but not obvious to others. Alternatively, it may not have an immediate impact, but the later realisation that the behaviour was not appropriate may be as harmful as the sexual behaviour itself. This informant suggested that if the perpetrator were an adult they would not be allowed to live with the child they had abused. The perpetrator being a child, however, meant that the siblings could continue to live together as long as the behaviour could be prevented from recurring. The informant implies that besides the abusive behaviour, the sibling relationship may be strong and valuable:

You wouldn't put a child in a household with a schedule 1 offender. But then we know the danger of separating siblings as well, and there's strong positive attachments it's actually it's just the abuse that needs to stop. So, you know, really strong kind of, erm, protection plans within the household erm and, and strong discussion and erm, you know, I, I suppose guidance from the family about what they can manage. (Informant 1)

#### **4.2.5 Conclusions to policy and guidance findings**

One has to be cautious about drawing conclusions from the views expressed by four senior managers. It comes across strongly nonetheless that the view is widely held that children with harmful sexual behaviour should be treated as children in the same way as any other children. This echoes the policy guidance. The senior managers' awareness of relevant policy was variable. Most of the relevant guidance is contained within youth justice policy, yet none of the policy informants directly mentioned the National Youth Justice Practice Guidance as a source of direction for social workers making decisions in this area of practice. Two of the four informants seemed to doubt the value of policy. Instead they suggested that social workers should make decisions on a case-by-case basis, as part of a multi-agency team, under guidance from managers, and on the basis of their relationships with the children and families with whom they are working.

### **4.3 “It was just questions marks” (Jenny)**

In addition to this limited policy steer, issues of uncertainty threaded throughout the decision making process for the social workers. I do not wish to argue here that there are greater levels of uncertainty in these cases than in other areas of social work; rather that the uncertainty had particular implications for decision making in the context potentially of having to choose between two children. I will highlight three areas of uncertainty which have significance in these cases.

#### **4.3.1 Not knowing what happened between the siblings**

In common with cases of sexual abuse generally, participants commented that there are usually no physical symptoms of the abuse to prompt social work inquiry in the way that one might expect with neglect or physical abuse, and social workers are therefore usually reliant on the behaviour being directly witnessed or disclosed. One participant expressed concern that children may be less likely to disclose sexual abuse than physical abuse, because:

[Physical abuse is] a tangible thing that she can tell us that happened to her that will protect her...it's like she immediately is able to tell us that bit because that's an easy thing to s-, I'm not saying it's easy but it's, it's easier to tell you than some of the other things that they've experienced.  
(Melanie)

Of the 26 groupings of sibling sexual behaviour discussed by the participants, the initial concerns were raised in 14 cases resulting from the behaviour being directly witnessed, and in only 11 cases through disclosure by the child. In one case the behaviour was neither disclosed nor witnessed, but strongly believed to have taken place. If the behaviour so often must be directly witnessed before coming to light, the possibility remains that sibling sexual behaviour may have taken place, which did not come to the social workers' attention.

Where sibling sexual behaviour was disclosed the participants said that they might still be left uncertain as to what had happened due to different accounts being given by the different children involved, or the details being unclear due to the child's

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young age, delayed speech development, or impaired cognitive ability. The participants experienced children disclosing more details as time went on, and what had appeared initially to be a single incident may turn out later to have been repeated:

Over time Gordon said, you know, that he had hurt him before. (Ruth)

Of the 14 groupings discussed by the participants where the sibling sexual behaviour became known by being directly witnessed, in seven cases the behaviour was witnessed by a resident parent; in three cases by a non-resident parent or other relative; in two cases by a foster carer; and in two cases by another child. One might imagine that the behaviour being witnessed would leave no room for doubt about what had happened (at least on that occasion), but this was not always the case. Lisa gave an example of allegations being made by a parent not living in the family home. She implied some doubts about the motivation behind these allegations due to the nature of the parental relationship, and said that other evidence would have been required for the social worker at the time to be convinced that there were indeed reasons to be concerned about the child’s sexual behaviour towards his siblings:

None of the allegations were founded by like, you know, any concerns sort of support by school or kind of by mum. So it didn’t really appear to kind of go anywhere after that. (Lisa, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy’s sexual behaviour towards his brother (aged seven) and sister (aged five))

In another example Melanie was not entirely confident that the foster carers were relaying strictly factual information about the sibling sexual behaviours because of their different feelings towards the two children involved:

There was, um, I suppose (sigh), again, things, cause, confusion (laughs). Um, the carers who have the younger of the two children, or who had both children, have become very attached to her. And there came a point where there was a bit of concern about, their assessment of the situation, and, they weren’t obviously exaggerating all of the information at

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all by any, but I think emotionally, their sense of things, was impacted by the disclosure she made... They still think what they witnessed was, was accurate and the, the, the disclosures that she made, you know they've interpreted them, they, they feel that, you know, they've interpreted them factually the information they've given to us is accurate. (Melanie, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy and his two year-old sister)

Melanie's view was that the foster carers' interpretation of what they said they had witnessed may have been influenced by the younger sibling's other disclosures and their protective feelings towards her. What they thought they saw, because of their perspective, may not have been what had happened. To put it another way, the social worker's perspective in both of the above examples influenced how they interpreted the information they were given.

The uncertainty was usually about the details of what happened and the number of incidents, but uncertainty over whether anything happened at all might still exist even if the behaviour had apparently been witnessed. For example, James described a situation where there had already been concerns about a boy's sexual behaviour, but when his mother reported witnessing further behaviour there was enough room for doubt about what she saw to allow contact between the siblings to continue:

Yeah, she says that she's sure that that happened. She's sure that that's what she seen and, and that's how she, she then said to [residential unit] that, that, she wasn't 100%. She just kind of thought, she got a sense that when she went in the room that Dean was doing something, um, to the young girl, whilst she was lying sleeping. So, so it wasn't sort of like, I seen that. I know that that happened. It was more of, yeah, well, I'm sure that there was something going on in the room. She was very suspicious of that. And I, it was from that basis that, that [residential unit] and social work, but it would have been social work that made the decision, was to say, well are you going to manage the, are you going to be able to manage the situation from now on? Are you sure that this happened? Yeah, pretty sure. But not, not fully sure. And, you know, er then agreed for the, the, the contacts, um, to continue. (James, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his one year-old sister)

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This example, and that given by Lisa above, suggest that it may sometimes be hard to believe that a child would behave in such a way to another child, to a sibling, even when it is witnessed and when there have already been concerns about the child’s sexual behaviour. Uncertainty over what had happened made social workers reluctant to make a decision to remove a child from their family or to stop contact. Annette concluded as a result of our interview discussion:

I think there is quite a heavy emphasis on proof, then. Um, which doesn’t help the victim, either, I can see that. Um, but without the proof, you know, if you take one course of action, you could actually be victimising the accused. (Annette, discussing alleged sexual behaviour by a 15 year-old boy towards his 10 year-old sister)

This concern about potentially victimising the accused was not expressed when the participants spoke about adults, be they siblings or other relatives, when there was uncertainty about whether sexual behaviour had taken place. In these cases participants were clear that the alleged perpetrator would need to be removed from the household or for contact to be stopped. Reflecting on a case he was currently involved with, Gordon had made a decision to remove the adult sibling from the family home on the basis of an unsubstantiated disclosure:

His parent was very upset about it saying, oh he is a vulnerable 18 year-old and she was told well this is a vulnerable 10 year-old, eight year-old, sorry. And he can’t protect himself against an 18 year-old and we are moving forward on the basis that something might have happened. (Gordon)

In relation to the case discussed above, Annette commented:

And possibly if Child A had been a couple of years older it would have been different as well. (Annette)

Annette thought that Child A would have been removed from the house had he been an adult. Karen similarly suggested that the evidence threshold with respect to adults was lower than that for children suspected of sexual abuse:

It's all about evidence. You know, so, if it was exactly the same circumstances, whether we'd have enough for a CPO (Child Protection Order) I don't know. But, I think it would have been more, likely that we would have, got a CPO if it was an adult. (Karen)

Uncertainty over what had happened was much more problematic for the social workers in their decision making in cases involving child siblings than in cases involving adults alleged to have behaved sexually towards a child.

#### **4.3.2 Not knowing the impact of the behaviour**

Very few of the participants discussed the impact of the sexual behaviour before I asked about it specifically. None of the participants expressed confidence that they knew what the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour had been. The belief that sexual behaviour between siblings was undesirable or could have a negative impact was implied insofar as decisions were debated about whether siblings could remain living together or having contact following the sexual behaviour becoming known. However, understanding what the impact had been was difficult for social workers and a number of reasons were given as to why this was the case.

Two participants said they lacked experience of working with children who had been sexually abused and therefore were unsure what signs of impact to look for. When asked what the impact had been, Jenny responded:

I don't know, I don't know and I think part of that. I guess you have to be aware of your own limitations and your own experience. You've never worked in a children and families team, so I've never significantly worked with children who've been abused in relation to the abuse...I've got nothing even to measure her against in terms of how she was presenting, was that normal, was it, I don't know. I don't know. (Jenny)

Annette, a social worker with seven years' experience in a children and families practice team, expressed a lack of specialist experience of sexual abuse as a reason for being unsure as to the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour:

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I’m not sure I’m in a position to separate it, um. Just through not, probably not having as much experience in just sexual stuff and how that, that does affect children. (Annette)

Annette’s observation that it was difficult to disentangle the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour from other issues in the child’s life was echoed by five other participants. These issues might involve other forms of abuse, the quality of parenting the child experienced, or the child having a learning disability:

So I don't know, Peter. I mean I can't really fully answer the impact...I think there's so many other factors involved. I think it had been, if there hadn't have been other issues of potential developmental delays in her area, and some of the parenting stuff as well. (Mary)

Do you know what? I don't know whether just, I mean there may be an impact, but I didn't really pick up on one. But it may be because there was so many issues in that family as well, it would be hard to pinpoint what related to what I suppose...it's hard to tell when there's so many issues. (Liz)

When asked what the impact had been, Liz seemed surprised by her answer that there may not have been any significant impact. An assumption that sexual abuse would have a significant adverse effect was not always borne out by the social workers’ experience of particular situations involving siblings. This is also reflected in Karen’s comments that the impact of the sibling sexual abuse might be hard to disentangle from others’ reactions to it. Karen believed that a boy may not have been directly traumatised by the sibling sexual abuse itself, but had learned to be so upset by it because of the strong responses of his father:

So it was kind of hard to get a sense of where Roger's true feelings were I think. And some of that was probably just him being really uncertain about how he should feel about what happened, because, um, you know, he obviously didn't like it and it made him feel uncomfortable, but, whether he felt sort of violated in the sense that his, his dad felt that he'd been, I don't know if he felt as strongly as his father about it. Um, but, by kind of feeding it, I think, over the course of the time I was involved and later, he'd, he was very aware that, you know, it shouldn't have happened. And it shouldn't, but it's, it's kind of about trying to get that sense of perspective, I suppose, you know of a young person who something like



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this has happened to. He's never experienced anything like that before, and doesn't really know what it means. Um, and has all these adults putting a label on it and saying, you know, this is how you should feel about it. And this is, you know, this is really awful and, and then his reaction and within himself as to, well, how should I be feeling about this? And whether, you know, that changed his, his perspective as he went on. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Four participants commented that while the impact of the sexual behaviour was not immediately evident, it might emerge some time later when the child was older:

I think the impact is, it's not always at the time, especially if the kids are younger. It, it comes out in probably later years, teenage years I would say. Specifically with young females I've seen it a lot. It's the thought back, my brother did that. (Mary)

But who knows what the long-term, impacts of that, may be. Um, it may come out when they're older adolescents. (Emma, discussing a case involving a nine year-old boy and his five year-old brother)

Well, as I say, it's difficult at this point in time, to know. The wee one just seems to be, floating by. Do you know, but again we've got your hidden harm, and you don't know. (Barbara, discussing a case involving the sexual behaviour of a 10 year-old girl towards her six year-old brother)

The participants had different beliefs about the impact of sibling sexual behaviour. Some thought that it would be extremely harmful, others that the harm might depend on the frequency, duration and types of behaviour, and some thought that the behaviour might feel uncomfortable but not necessarily traumatic. Whatever their beliefs, none of the participants expressed confidence that they knew what the impact had been or would be. The lack of clear and immediate evidence of impact left room for the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour to be under-estimated, over-estimated, or over-looked. Several participants commented that decision making was easier in other cases where the evidence of harm was more apparent:

It's one of these situations where, you're not entirely kind of comfortable with two options, accommodate or not, you know, it's always easier when, your eviden-, the childr- you've got evidence, I always say that the children with the black eyes or the broken limbs it's a lot-, it's an easier child protection decision. (Fiona, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Fiona was not comfortable with the idea of removing the perpetrator from the family home, but was equally uncomfortable with allowing him to remain living with his sibling. Clear evidence of the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour would have made the decision easier. A lack of evidence of what happened, and its impact, made the social workers' decision making more difficult in these cases.

#### **4.3.3 Not knowing the risks of future sibling sexual behaviour**

Where risks were explicitly discussed, one of the difficulties participants expressed was not having all of the information recorded or having the time to read the records. This hindered the social workers from being able to form a view of the risks of future sibling sexual behaviour. The dubiety over what had happened between the siblings was often compounded by a lack of clear and detailed recording of what had been reported at the time:

Peter: A sexual assault, ok. Do you know what that involved?

Jenny: There's very little information about it. (Jenny)

It's, because, in this particular case it just feels like there's no clarity about when this information came about, who it was told to, who was involved, and it just seems quite kind of quite bitty at times. Um, whereas I think, you know, if disclosures and things are made it's important for them to be recorded so that, you know, when you do look back at it, you know, you can, you can kind of make a better assessment of that...the actual explicit recording of risks, concerns, um, how each of those have been managed within a plan, it's not very clear. (Lisa)

Sometimes workers aren't exactly clear about what they're writing. They're scared to write things on our system...So

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there are kind of things are always a bit muddy or a bit woolly or a bit, you know, focusing on other areas rather than the actual concern. And that's, that's, that's what you get when you pick, I mean maybe you've seen that yourself, I don't know. You get the case notes and it's probably about workers scared to actually say, this is what happened. Or this is what's reported to have happened and you see that over and over again. So it's kind of difficult sometimes to actually pull out the facts from what happened here. (James)

I was not able to ascertain what James thought might make social workers scared to record information, but the frustration over a lack of clear recording of past events was expressed frequently.

Even when the information was available, three participants expressed concern that they did not have the time to read the case files thoroughly, and that the detailed information about what had happened between the siblings remained buried within large files. Sharon expressed both a concern about not having the time to read the files and a lack of detailed information in the files:

I just don't have the time to sit and go through, um, all their case files but there probably is like, there's a lot of the history stuff, like do you know, I wouldn't have been able to have answered what kind of behaviour, er, sexualised behaviour were they displaying in placement, and Penny's only able to do that because she was the worker at the time, because I don't think that's all documented. (Sharon)

Sharon later expressed a concern that not having the time to read through the case files and get to know a case would impair the quality of the decision making:

These things that really gets you to build up a picture, and getting the chance to look through case files, and for me, as a worker, I've never had that opportunity to sit and go through all these files and, and in some ways I feel then, I'm doing a bit of an injustice to, er, the kids in providing the best service. (Sharon)

Instead of having the time to read case files, Sharon said that they were “bam, right into hearings, and everything”, a sentiment echoed by Jenny:

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I think often in social work there’s a sense that you need to know what you’re doing, and actually you get a new case and you just crack on. (Jenny)

As well as not always knowing what happened between the siblings, or this information not being recorded, there were many other potential unknowns in these cases, such as the cognitive capacities of the children, what abuse the children may have experienced at the hands of their parents, and what the protective abilities of the parents were. Brian expressed clearly the challenges this lack of certainty presented in terms of predicting future risk:

So in actual fact, and you don’t even know what the risks are. What you have to do, is you have to almost predict, what could happen, and that’s not very, you know, it’s not necessarily really, when you have a lot of background information, and when you are doing an assessment on a future risk and stuff like that, the more background information you have, the easier it is to predict what could potentially happen. When you don’t have any information you’re making a prediction based on um, on what you don’t know rather than what you do know. (Brian)

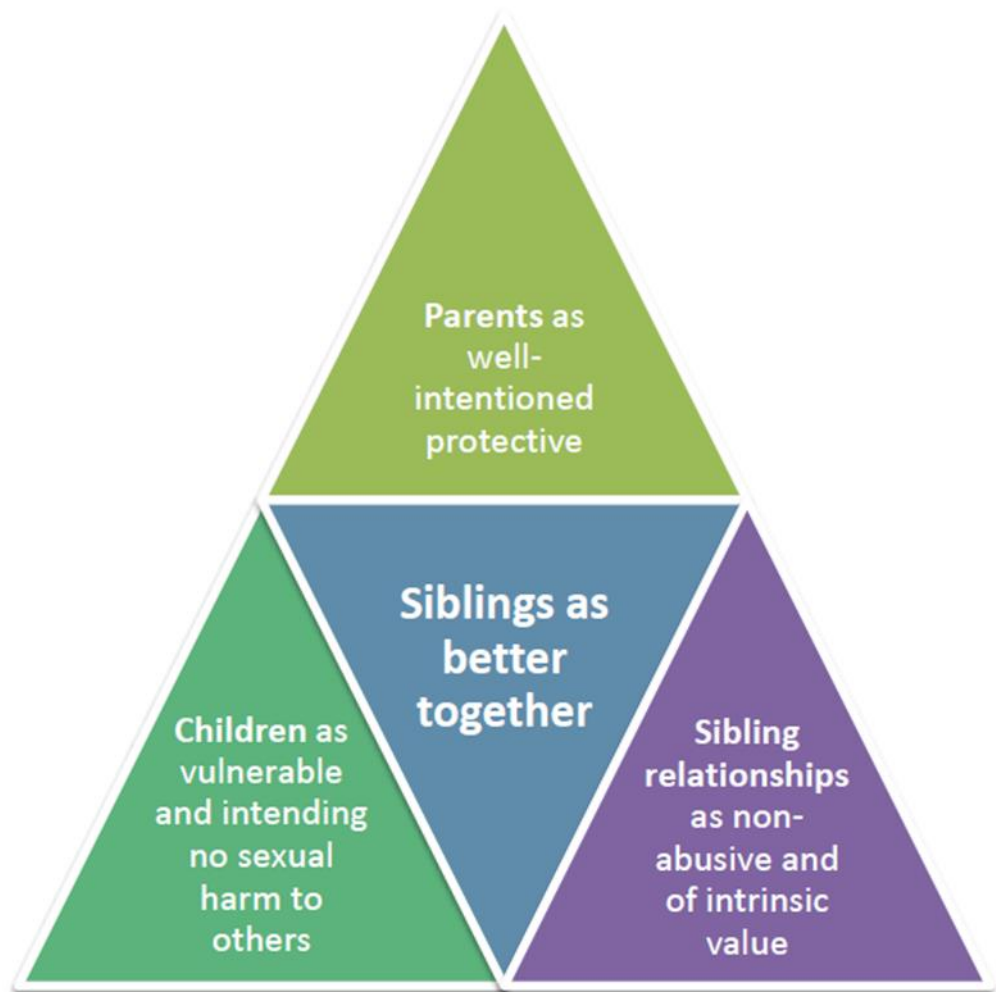
Even in a case where the participant said that they had much more confidence in the information that was available to them, and as a consequence more confidence in their assessment of risk, it was not possible to be certain about the potential for future sibling sexual behaviour and it was difficult to know how much risk was worth taking:

And I went to the case conferences and I was really clear, that as far as I could possibly, I mean I was really clear I couldn’t be definite about these things at all but in terms of risk, that I didn’t think the risk was great at all...but, it’s almost that kind of, what’s good enough, and how risky is risky and is it risky enough that she can’t be there or is it risky enough that we just manage it and, not easy, not easy decisions. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

## 4.4 Conclusions

When making decisions about siblings’ living and contact arrangements, social workers do so in the context of limited legislative and policy guidance. The most applicable policy is within youth justice, but most of the participants are from children and families backgrounds. The policy informants had inconsistent awareness of relevant policy, and some suggested that policy may not be helpful; rather decisions need to be taken on an individual basis in relationship with children and families. In addition, the participants identified the challenges of making decisions in the context of considerable uncertainty. It sometimes seemed hard to believe that a child would behave sexually in a potentially harmful way to another child, to their sibling, and what was believed to have taken place could be influenced by the worker’s perspective and their relationship with the children involved. While not knowing what happened did not present the social workers with difficulties in cases where the alleged perpetrator was an adult, uncertainty about the sibling sexual behaviours, their impact, and their risk of recurrence was much more problematic when the alleged perpetrator was a child. When choosing between the needs of two children, “how risky is risky” became a pertinent and obstinate question.

In the context of limited policy and considerable uncertainty, social workers have to make decisions about sibling living and contact arrangements anyway. By way of introduction to the next three chapters, it has emerged from my analysis of the interview data that against this background of uncertainty and limited guidance, social workers report making largely intuitive decisions in relationship with children and parents. In particular, rather than being assessment-based, the decisions are underpinned by a cognitive orientation, a practice mindset, ‘siblings as better together’. This practice mindset, a concept I will explore further in the discussion of the findings, shapes the social workers’ perceptions and interpretations of cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, and is comprised of three underlying perspectives: that children are vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others; that sibling relationships are non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and that parents are well-intentioned protective. The model I have developed is represented below:



**Figure 4-1: The social workers' practice mindset 'siblings as better together'**

*Children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others*

From the social workers' perspective, children may engage in sexual behaviours but are expected to be vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others. For the social workers, 'child' is a spectrum concept. It is not determined by legal age; rather children are more or less 'child' according to the extent to which they are young, innocent, asexual, blameless and vulnerable. Children become more 'child' the younger they are, the more that they are considered to be a victim, and the less

responsible they can be held for their actions. Children become less ‘child’ the older they are, the more they engage in sexual behaviours, and the more they can be held responsible for their actions.

Maintaining a perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others makes it difficult for the social workers to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour and militates against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate siblings from their families and from each other.

#### *Sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value*

For the social workers, sibling relationships may entail a whole array of behaviours and dynamics, including fighting, nurturing, protecting, warmth, jealousy, hostility, rivalry, and so on. The social workers’ perspective does not include the possibility of sibling relationships being abusive. Short of being abusive, whatever the quality of the sibling relationship, it is supposed to be of value and its maintenance should therefore be supported.

Maintaining a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value contributes to the difficulties the social workers have in making sense of sibling sexual behaviour, focusing attention on immediate safety and away from the behaviour’s potential emotional impact. It influences decisions in favour of siblings remaining living together or in direct face-to-face contact with each other.

#### *Parents as well-intentioned protective*

If parents are considered to be ‘on board’, that is, the kind of parents with whom the social worker feels they can work, and who appear to share the social worker’s understanding of the problem, it is inferred that the parents are well-intentioned protective with respect to their children. Being well-intentioned means caring about and wanting the best for the children. Being protective means having the intention to try to protect the children from harm. Social workers make judgements about these two dimensions of a parent’s character, which are distinct but overlapping and interrelated, hence using the term ‘well-intentioned protective’. As long as parents

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continue to engage with services, once established, the perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective can be maintained despite evidence which may indicate a lack of ability to protect.

Social workers are inclined to support the wishes of parents judged to be well-intentioned protective, which in most cases means siblings remaining together.

In combination, these three underlying perspectives form the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’. The perspectives operate dynamically and in association with each other. Sibling relationships are non-abusive and of intrinsic value only if the siblings are all children. Siblings are very clearly not regarded as better together if the perpetrator is considered to be an adult. The more ‘child’ the perpetrator, by virtue of perceived vulnerability, responsibility, and particularly by virtue of age, the more reluctant the social worker to consider separating the siblings. The desire to maintain the sibling relationship may be likewise diminished if the siblings do not live and have not grown up together.

All three perspectives are highly contingent upon the relationship the social worker has with the family. The perspective of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others is stronger the closer the social worker’s relationship with the perpetrator. Social workers allocated to work only with the victim may be more likely to consider the perpetrator as a sexual abuser and therefore less reluctant to consider the possibility of separating the siblings. Likewise the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value is stronger the more closely the social worker is acquainted with the children as siblings. Social workers may maintain the perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective the more they know and like the parents. Social workers’ expectations of parents may diminish when under pressure of time and resources.

There is some evidence that social workers with more specialised training and experience of working with cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour may make less intuitive and more assessment-based decisions. For the most part,



however, I will argue that information is perceived and interpreted by the social workers in accordance with the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’, and mechanisms support the maintenance of this mindset in the face of potentially contradictory evidence. In the context of limited policy and considerable uncertainty, ‘siblings as better together’ has a strong influence over decisions social workers make with respect to sibling contact and living arrangements in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour.

The dynamic nature of the model will be explored in more detail in the following chapters as I take the three underlying perspectives in turn to show how they have been derived from the social workers’ accounts and the influence they have over social worker decision making. I will draw these perspectives together again in the ensuing discussion to make connections between the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ and the extant literature, before concluding with recommendations for research, policy and practice.



## **Chapter 5: Maintaining an underlying perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The last chapter identified that social workers might find it hard to believe that a child would behave sexually in a potentially harmful way towards their sibling. Uncertainty created difficulties for social workers when the perpetrator was a child in a way that was not the case when the perpetrator was an adult. In this context, social workers made decisions based upon their practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’, comprising three underlying perspectives: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective. This chapter will demonstrate that the social workers’ perspective of children was consonant with a child being a victim of sexual abuse, but dissonant with a child being a sexual abuser. For the social workers, ‘child’ emerged as a spectrum concept, children being more or less ‘child’ according to the degree to which they were perceived as young, innocent, asexual, blameless, and vulnerable. Children did not necessarily cease being children by reaching the age of 18 if they continued to be regarded as vulnerable. The social workers’ perspective of children made it difficult to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. The social workers often resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse, and looked for reasons to explain how such behaviour could be displayed by a child, their explanations typically mitigating the culpability of the perpetrator and reinforcing their perspective of children. The social workers made a conscious and self-reflexive effort to maintain a view of the perpetrator as a vulnerable child with needs as a victim, with the result that prioritising the respective needs of the perpetrator and victim of the sibling sexual behaviour was not solely contingent upon their roles in the behaviour. Maintaining a perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others militated against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate siblings from their families and from each other.

## 5.2 Differentiating normal from concerning sibling sexual behaviour

Notwithstanding uncertainties as to what may have taken place between the siblings, on the basis of what the participants understood to have happened they all expressed confidence that they had been able to differentiate normal sexual behaviour between sibling children from behaviour that would raise concerns. The participants generally took the view that very young siblings might engage in playful exploration of each other’s bodies, which could provide a healthy learning opportunity. This is exemplified by Laura in response to a question about whether there might be sexual behaviours between siblings that would be of no concern:

Yeah, oh yeah, like kind of em, kind of, you show me yours, I’ll show you mine type of thing, em, I probably, when children are a little bit younger as well I think it’s slightly more, there’s sort of less of a, an understanding about, it’s quite innocent, whereas when you’re older it’s all a bit, you know it’s, it’s got a little bit more significance, it’s not just about bodies, it’s about kind of, sex and, it’s less kind of, it, it’s less appropriate, I suppose, it’s less like, it’s not like eh, a child, not understanding, not putting a certain connotation on what they are doing, it’s, it’s got a bit more to it when someone’s older but, yeah I think with younger siblings I don’t really see it as, I think it’s kind of like a, a way people learn and a way people kind of explore themselves and, and that kind of thing. I think that’s, I think that’s much more normal, em, and sort of doesn’t really signify anything kind of risky or, em, unhealthy. (Laura)

Laura associates innocence with being a very young child, lacking sexual awareness and interest. Playful, exploratory behaviour between young, innocent siblings, behaviour which is purely about bodies and not ‘about sex’, would raise no concerns about risks. Any questions about separating the siblings need not arise.

Jenny similarly thought that very young siblings might be expected to engage in exploratory behaviour. She also suggested that however developmentally normal this behaviour might be, it would be considered inappropriate and should be discouraged:

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I guess there’s an acceptance that little ones, will engage in exploratory behaviour and that there comes a point, and I’m not sure maybe there is a line and people would say an age but I guess it depends developmentally where they’re at so I think there’s an assumption that sometimes little ones will be inappropriate and you point it out to them that they shouldn’t do that and most little ones then stop doing it. (Jenny)

The social workers were generally agreed that it would be natural for very young siblings to be curious about bodies and to engage in playful exploration with each other. This play would not raise concerns as long as it was innocent, not ‘about sex’, and as long as it did not continue once discouraged.

It was difficult to be precise about what it meant for behaviour to be ‘about sex’, and if in doubt the social worker might take into account the context in which the behaviour took place. Melanie discussed a case involving four and five year-old sisters living with foster carers, where the behaviour displayed between the two girls was difficult to interpret. In a context of suspicions of sexual abuse by the girls’ parents, however, the social worker believed that the behaviour was not purely about exploration of bodies, but that there was “more to it”. One could construe this as meaning that the behaviour was possibly about sex, that these young children were no longer innocent and asexual, therefore raising concerns about whether this behaviour might be persistent and could be displayed towards other children:

My understanding of the incidents when it happened was that it was touching over clothes and but it was between their legs, um, certainly more intimate than you would want to happen but I suppose in isolation you might question what that was about, but because of the context of it we felt there was more to it, and because of that we had to obviously work with the carers about how they managed that, um, and what their understanding of the risks were to them and to other children. (Melanie, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours between sisters aged four and five years old)

The participants said that they would assume that exploratory behaviour between older children would be about sex. This would be developmentally expected if the children were unrelated, but would raise concerns if the children were siblings.

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The participants were all clear that sexual behaviour between older siblings would be unacceptable. They assumed a shared understanding of the unacceptability of sibling sexual behaviour to the extent that most participants did not mention the children’s relationship as siblings as a reason for regarding the behaviour as concerning. This was so obvious a reason to be concerned about the behaviour that it did not occur to them to state it. For example, when I reflected to James and Angela that they had not offered the children’s relationship as siblings as a criterion for the behaviour raising concerns, they responded as follows:

Yeah, they're siblings and that's maybe taken as a given that that's wrong (laughs). It may be, you know, kind of working from that basis that, you know, what's the other factors that may come up?...Maybe it's the case that I'm taking that as a given that it is, it is fundamentally wrong, anyway. So I mean, that's obvious, that's there. So we're then looking at the other add-ons to that.” (James)

I mean that maybe goes without saying. I maybe didn't mention it, 'cause I thought that was maybe a quite obvious thing. But erm, but yeah, I think that's part of why it's, that's not acceptable behaviour. (Angela)

Albeit that it was clear that sexual behaviour between older siblings was unacceptable, the social workers might still not be sure quite how concerned to be about the behaviour. Annette reasoned that the circumstances in which siblings are raised could encourage some exploration of each other’s bodies:

I think actually it’s very, very natural for children, you know up to a certain age, to be curious, and to touch each other and want to look at each other, um, and I think even between brothers and sisters when they’re really young, you know, we bathe our children together, and why would you then expect them not to be looking at each other. (Annette)

As a consequence:

I could almost understand brothers and sisters getting it wrong by mistake, if they’ve been brought up, you know bathing together, being naked together, and then being curious enough to touch each other. (Annette)

Maintaining an underlying perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others

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While it is easy to know that sexual behaviour between siblings is wrong, the circumstances in which siblings are raised makes it harder for the social workers to be clear about the extent to which they need to be concerned about the behaviour. It might be exploratory behaviour mis-directed towards a sibling rather than to another unrelated child; it might be hoped that the behaviour would stop if the children are told that it is wrong. This points towards some of the criteria that the participants said that they deployed in order to differentiate behaviour which did not raise concerns from behaviour which might signify something ‘risky’ or ‘unhealthy’, and therefore raise questions about the continuation of existing contact and living arrangements.

Repetition was a criterion which more than half of the participants cited as helping them to determine if they should be concerned about the sibling sexual behaviour. If they were not sure the first time whether or not the behaviour was part of normal exploration, then a repeat of the behaviour after the children had been admonished would mark the behaviour out as more concerning. Barbara was initially unsure how to interpret sexual behaviour between a seven year-old boy and his four year-old sister. The behaviour being repeated and the children seeming to know what they were doing meant that she could not put the behaviour down to experimentation:

So, I just didn't, I just didn't get the feeling that, you know, it was, you know the right, when young people experiment and things like that, it's kind of, well, my feeling is it's kind of isolated and, you know, but I didn't think like, that's three kind of days in a row it's been attempted and um, they seem to know exactly what they were doing. (Barbara)

The participants also had expectations about the kinds of behaviours that children might engage in at different ages. Behaviour that is “more intimate than you would want to happen” (Melanie) for the age of the child would raise concerns, as this quote from Emma illustrates when discussing eight and nine year-old boys:

I think given, their age as well. I mean, I, I wouldn't be expecting kids to be engaging in oral sex, or, tried to, you know, have anal sex of any sort. That kind of, I think really set people's backs up. (Emma)

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Otherwise the participants typically pointed to criteria such as a large age-gap between the children; other power imbalances such as size or cognitive ability; a lack of consent from one party; the behaviour being illegal; the behaviour being hidden and secretive, or otherwise unabashed and in full view of others. There was only one case of a participant stating that they were aware of force being used, and this was given as a reason for judging the behaviour as unacceptable.

In the context of the cases they discussed, most of the participants were able to give a number of reasons for judging the behaviour to have been concerning, as Jenny illustrates:

It was his sister, and she was much, much younger than him, and much, much smaller than him... I think he knew that what he was doing was wrong... He knew it was wrong because there'd been a similar situation two years previously, and he knew it was wrong then so he knew it was wrong now.  
(Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny was unusual in citing the sibling relationship as a criterion for judging the behaviour as concerning. The repetition of the behaviour was highlighted, as well as the age and size differences between the siblings.

Social workers would expect very young, innocent and asexual children to engage in exploratory behaviour of each other's bodies. Such exploration would be expected but regarded as inappropriate if taking place between siblings. It should stop if the siblings are admonished. The social workers expressed confidence that they had been able to differentiate exploratory from concerning behaviour, but this did not mean that this had always been easy. The behaviour became more concerning when it was 'about sex', but the children being siblings made it more difficult to make sense of quite how concerned to be. The social workers drew on a range of criteria, a second incident often being cited as helpful in clarifying that the behaviour was 'about sex' and of concern. The social workers did not discuss any case examples where they had been able to decide that the siblings could remain living together or having contact with each other on the basis that the behaviour constituted innocent and



playful exploration. In all of the cases discussed by the social workers the sibling sexual behaviour was of concern to them, raising questions about whether or not the siblings needed to be separated.

### **5.3 Cases with no identifiable perpetrator and victim**

The participants rarely referred to a child as the ‘perpetrator’, more frequently used the term ‘victim’, but usually identified the sibling they were talking about by pseudonym, relative age, and so on. Nonetheless it was usually the social workers’ experience that one of the siblings was seen to initiate or instigate the sexual behaviour with the potential for harm to be caused to the other sibling, rather than the behaviour being perceived as mutually initiated. As discussed in the Introduction, I will use the terms ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ for the sake of brevity and clarity to describe the roles the children played in the sexual behaviour. Of the cases the participants discussed, there were three examples where they did not identify significant power differences between the children, and where the behaviour was perceived as mutually initiated.

Melanie described a case referred to above, involving sisters aged four and five who had been accommodated with foster carers as a result of parental abuse including suspected sexual abuse. Melanie described the sisters’ sexual behaviours as ‘inappropriate’:

There had been a couple of incidents as I’ve described where they were, seemed to be some touching which was, um, inappropriate well, inappropriate in that it was too intimate.  
(Melanie)

The behaviour involved the siblings touching each other, with no sense of either child being the perpetrator or victim. Melanie concluded that the behaviour resulted from the children’s abuse experiences. They needed a stable care-giving environment with skilled foster carers in order to process and recover from those experiences. The sexual behaviour needed to be discouraged, but Melanie saw no reason to separate the siblings. Emma provided a similar example of two young brothers, close in age,

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engaging in sexual behaviours with each other as a result of their abuse experiences, again seeing no need to separate the siblings.

Gordon described a case involving teenage twin siblings, where for complex reasons the sibling sexual behaviour was strongly believed to have taken place without having been disclosed or witnessed. It was thought to be a way the brother and sister sought comfort in each other in the midst of multiple abuse experiences. Gordon did not regard either child as the perpetrator or victim, the siblings being of similar size and Gordon judging there to be no power differences between them. In describing the behaviours, Gordon said:

You could call it exploratory, experimental, eh, both young people had similar, similar, level of need. (Gordon)

The siblings were accommodated together as a result of their home experiences, and while seeking to stop any further sibling sexual behaviour taking place, Gordon considered that any harm that may have been caused by sibling sexual behaviours not regarded as abusive, would not have outweighed the harm that would have been caused by separating the siblings:

“You know it’s about separating families and (2 seconds) if it wasn’t, och, it’s all that stuff about if it wasn’t abusive, you know it’s, it would almost, the, kids any damage caused by it.” (Gordon)

Deciding whether or not behaviour was mutually initiated was sometimes difficult for the social workers when the siblings were older and close in age. James gave an example of 12 and 11 year-old brothers, where it was understood that their sexual behaviour was at least initially a form of comfort in the midst of multiple abuse and violence within the household. The younger brother later alleged sexual assault, the older brother maintaining that the sexual behaviour was consensual. There was reported dubiety among the social workers involved over how to interpret the behaviour. Some maintained that the behaviour was a comfort to both children. James, however, concluded that it was not consensual:

But although, kind of the way the reports explain it, it was like, yeah, well it was questionable as to the extent of kind of how much was forceful and how much was, you know, actually down to them being together, you know, in that kind of environment where they were sort of comforting one another to that extent.

But I would certainly say that the younger brother by age, by physical development, by, you know, his kind of emotional development, he's a lot younger than, than, than he is. And, and it would seem by that, that Dean took advantage of that situation. (James)

James considered the nature of the sibling relationship and the respective chronological and developmental ages of the siblings in coming to the conclusion that the sexual behaviour had not been mutually initiated. By this time the siblings were already living separately for other reasons.

The social workers considered that siblings are best kept together if the behaviour takes place between young children and is seen as developmentally normal, or if both children are regarded as victims of abuse and the behaviour is perceived as mutually initiated. The majority of the cases discussed by the social workers involved siblings who could more clearly be identified as occupying the roles of perpetrator and victim, and it is to these cases that I shall now turn.

## **5.4 The perpetrator is a child but the victim is the child**

Apart from the three examples above, the cases discussed by the participants entailed sexual behaviour taking place between siblings where the participants identified significant power differences between the children involved, usually by virtue of age, cognitive ability, or both. The average age gap between the siblings involved was just over five years, 11 of the older siblings being charged with an offence. The participants clearly identified one or more of the older siblings as initiating or instigating the behaviour, with the implication of the potential for harm being caused to the younger sibling. It was highlighted earlier that where the perpetrator was an

adult, their needs would be simply vitiated in deference to those of the victim.

Decision making was more complex when the perpetrator was a child.

Three participants expressed the view explicitly that the victim’s needs should be prioritised over the perpetrator’s needs, and as will be discussed in a later chapter, there was an expectation of well-intentioned protective parents that they should similarly be willing to prioritise the needs of the victim over the perpetrator. George recognised that it would be his natural inclination to support the needs of the victim, and in his role as the social worker for the perpetrator chose not to meet the victim for the following reason:

If I’m being wholly honest, I think it would’ve clouded, my, opinion of the young man. I had formed an opinion of him about in terms, but it was a professional opinion, not a personal opinion, because up until this point I had only ever seen photographs of this child, I had never seen her face-to-face as the victim, and I think I’m honest enough to say that if I had seen her, I’d have seen a, I would’ve seen a victim, and a daddy would’ve taken over, not a social worker...I think I’d have made a judgement on the boy, and I think I’d have been harsher on him, because this, you know, he’s a child but she’s a, she is the child. (George, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his seven year-old sister)

For George both perpetrator and victim are children, but the victim is more of a child than the perpetrator. The perpetrator is ‘a child’, but the victim is ‘the child’. George avoided meeting the victim so as to be able to set aside his personal feelings in order to work to the best of his professional ability to meet the needs of the perpetrator. For George the needs of the victim would be prioritised over those of the perpetrator, but this did not mean that the perpetrator’s needs would be neglected. Indeed, like George, six of the participants expressed making a conscious and self-reflexive effort to keep any personal judgements separate from their professional responsibility to attend to the needs of the perpetrator as a child.

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Angela expressed this as follows:

I think for me, sexual abuse is quite a difficult area of the job. I think it's, I think it's quite a difficult thing to, to take in and process as a worker, I think, because your automatic instinct is to be very protective towards children. And I think it's very easy to, you know, to go into the role of ‘oh well, that's, that's the wrong thing to do’ and...not criminalise, but sort of label, label that child in a negative way.

But then thinking it through that isn't useful, that is actually not sometimes not even the most protective way to, to deal with things.

I think you, erm, you try and kind of be compassionate towards every child, whatever situation they're in. Erm, and whatever they've done in the past. (Angela, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

Angela recognised that her instinctive response would be to label the perpetrator negatively and to be protective of the victim. This reflexivity allowed her to continue to respond to the perpetrator as a child with needs.

Annette was the social worker for both children involved in sexual behaviour alleged by the younger sibling, and expressed a similarly conscious effort to set aside initial reactions in order to bear the needs of the alleged perpetrator in mind:

And I think because of, you know, it's so emotive, sexual abuse, and I think you naturally, you know look at the victim, or alleged victim, and try and secure and save them, and make things as better as you can, as quickly as you can.

[But] I think what's been quite unique about this case is, the child's a perpetrator, or the victim and perpetrator alleged are both children...you know developmentally and his own backstory you have to take into account, so, you know it's been challenging in that way, and challenging in that you don't just go with the, your initial gut reaction to save somebody that's alleged something so awful, you know you actually have to unpick, and you know not go straight to what you think is the right thing to do, saving, you know let's save you from the pain of that by putting support in, but actually there's a whole family involved, and family dynamics

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involved, and, you know a much bigger picture. (Annette,  
discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10  
year-old sister)

Annette said that she would not have had to take into account the needs of the alleged perpetrator had he been an adult, and would have felt clear that he must leave the family home. With the alleged perpetrator being a child, however, she made a conscious effort to address his needs as a child and to consider the wider family dynamics as a way to understand the allegations. In this example there was some uncertainty over the sibling sexual behaviour taking place due to concerns about the younger sibling having reason to fabricate the allegations. Had there been proof of the sexual behaviour, Annette speculated that decision making might have been different. The older boy remained at home, but Annette was clear that had he been just a few years older a different decision would have been made.

While the social workers made such an effort to consider the perpetrator’s needs, there could nonetheless be some discomfort in advocating for their needs to be met if this might compromise those of the victim. In the following extract Jenny discusses taking part in a child protection case conference and coming up against the views of other participants, participants who had no relationship with the perpetrator, that he should leave the family home. During the time Jenny had been working with the perpetrator he had turned 18 and was legally an adult. For other workers his needs no longer had to be taken into account, but Jenny continued to regard him as a child despite his age by virtue of his continued vulnerability:

I was saying to them, I said he’s really vulnerable, and it’s hard, it’s hard being in a child protection case conference when your client is the perpetrator, but they’re still a child, only he’s not anymore, but you knew them as a child, and so I guess you’re, we’re so used to fighting the corner of the perpetrator, not inappropriately, but do you know to make people see their needs and their welfare, and do you know, those kind of things, and it’s really hard because ultimately, the victim comes first. That’s what it seems like, and in some ways I can understand that, but when your job’s to work with this person it’s really hard.

And it’s really hard being taken into a child protection case conference and I find this anyway sometimes, is everybody has to be part of the decision, and I know that that’s the process, but sometimes if you’re going in and you’re the representative of the perpetrator, that’s really hard to make a decision because actually that perpetrator was a child, and you’ve got that best interest of that child, but it’s another child that you’re, it’s really messy, and I find that really hard. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a (by then) 18 year-old brother and his 13 year-old sister)

In this extract Jenny, a youth justice social worker, suggests that it is a common experience to have to advocate for the needs of the perpetrator in the context of other workers who do not readily consider them. She acknowledges and agrees in principle to the idea that the victim’s needs would be prioritised over those of the perpetrator, but not to the exclusion of the perpetrator’s needs altogether. Prioritising is an issue of degree, not a binary choice. Both being children, deciding the degree to which the victim’s needs might prevail over those of the perpetrator, or deciding the degree to which the perpetrator’s needs might compromise those of the victim, feels in Jenny’s words, “really messy”. The victim may be the child, but the perpetrator is still a child despite his behaviour, and in this case not by virtue of age but by virtue of perceived vulnerability. For Jenny this militated against any straightforward decision to remove him from the family home, and for this and other important reasons to be explored in later chapters it was decided that he could remain living at home with his sister.

To summarise so far, there is no need to consider separating siblings who are young, innocent, blameless, and who engage in exploratory behaviour of each other’s bodies in a way that is not ‘about sex’. Where siblings are less innocent and engage in behaviour which is about sex, but which is mutually initiated and seen to be the result of their own abuse experiences, there would be no need to separate them as long as the behaviour could be stopped and any perceived risks to other children managed. Perpetrators of sexual behaviour, however, are at least on the face of it less innocent and blameless. They are less ‘child’ than their younger, blameless victims and their needs would take lower priority. Their needs would not be neglected altogether, however; rather the social workers, especially those who have a

relationship with the perpetrator, see it as their professional responsibility to make a conscious and self-reflexive effort to continue to see the perpetrator as a child with needs which require to be met. Prioritising is a matter of degree, not a binary choice, with the perceived vulnerability of the perpetrator being influential in this choice. The more ‘child’ the perpetrator, the more finely balanced the decision making.

To give one final example, Brian expressed a similar sense of professional obligation to preserve the view of the perpetrator as a child:

We needed to realise that he is quite vulnerable, um, at that age, he had to learn it somewhere, or he had to, we don’t know what, we didn’t know what had happened to him, so we needed to be kind of sensitive about how we dealt with him as well. (Brian, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

Brian was clear that the needs of the victim should be approached with sensitivity, but was mindful that the perpetrator might also have vulnerabilities. For Brian there had to be a reason underlying the boy’s behaviour, and it would need to be considered that something might have happened to him which would explain his sexual behaviour towards his sister. He might also be a victim.

### **5.4.1 Looking for reasons**

Like Brian, almost all of the participants expressed the view that a child behaving sexually towards another child in a potentially harmful way required an explanation. This was not behaviour that social workers would expect from children. Whereas they might accept the possibility of an adult sexually abusing a child for no other reason than that they are a sexual abuser, if the perpetrator were themselves a child the social workers looked for other reasons to try to understand the behaviour. Typically the social workers would believe that something must have happened to the perpetrator:

It’s like another scale when it’s a parent or an adult in a position of power because, they have that level of responsibility. And I suppose that’s the difference and that’s where it’s, it is harder when it’s children abusing other



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children, is that you're still looking at this other child and trying to work out, well, you know, what has made them to do that? Why are they in that position, is there's something that's happened to them? (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Laura expressed the view succinctly that when children are perpetrators they cannot simply be dismissed as immoral or evil; rather their behaviour requires our understanding:

These kids aren't bad or, you know it's not because of the devil or anything like that it's, it's there for a reason. (Laura)

From the social workers' perspective, children are not sexual abusers. Their behaviour requires a deeper level of understanding. This understanding should help the social workers to maintain the perspective that the perpetrator is a child with needs which require appropriate support:

For children to act, you know, to be acting out sexual behaviour it came from somewhere. And we need to look at where it came from and um, give the support where it's needed. (Barbara)

The participants offered four main explanations for sibling sexual behaviour which involved a victim and a perpetrator: that the perpetrator had been sexually abused themselves; that there were poor sexual boundaries within the home; that the perpetrator had experienced other forms of abuse; and that the perpetrator was acting out of curiosity and exploration, lacking the social confidence and opportunity to experiment sexually with same-age peers in the community.

Liz expressed the belief that a 14 year-old girl's sexual behaviour towards her younger siblings must have its roots in experiences of abuse, and thought that sexual abuse was most likely:

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And I definitely think, I mean, her behaviour came from somewhere. But, we don't know where.

I mean, I suppose, the only thing I would think about is that she's been sexually abused herself, but I don't know if that's always the case. (Liz)

Lisa offered ‘poor sexual boundaries’ within the household in addition to an experience of sexual abuse as a possible explanation for the behaviour:

It's really difficult because I mean I suppose you just kind of, you do tend to hypothesise about where those behaviours are coming from, and whether that's, you know, Dan trying to make sense of his own experiences of sexual abuse and that's manifesting it in, more kind of inappropriate sexual behaviour.

I don't know whether his experiences of sexual abuse is, you know, he's not fully understanding what's kind of going on and he's then mimicking these behaviours with siblings, um, and this other young person. And that combined with all the kind of exposure, to poor kind of sexual boundaries in the house.

I don't know whether it is because of being, from probably what's kind of maybe kind of being said about, you know, multiple people coming in, you know, there being, you know, mum being in the bed having sex with sort of unknown people. You know, quite a lot of the-, mum being quite exposed in terms of her body. Um, access to kind of like sex channels on the TV and pornography through the internet. (Lisa, discussing the sexual behaviours of a 10 year-old boy towards his brother (aged seven) and sister (aged five))

Lisa's proposed explanation for this boy's behaviours reduces his culpability and intention to harm insofar as it is suggested the he does not fully understand what is going on and is trying to make sense of his experiences as a victim of sexual abuse. Lisa uses the phrase ‘poor sexual boundaries’ to describe various activities, including witnessing the mother having sex with different unknown people, and being exposed to pornography through various media. George also invoked the concept of poor sexual boundaries to explain a 15 year-old boy's sexual behaviour towards his seven year-old sister, this time meaning immediate and extended family members swapping

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partners and failing to model a respect for familial sexual boundaries. Once again George suggests confusion and a lack of understanding on the boy’s part:

I think it goes back to, um, for me for the lad it went back to the break-up of his mum and dad’s relationship, and then his [female relative] taking over as his mother, in terms of confusion, um, at his stage of development. Then sort of loss, element in terms of his mum, and, being around, an extended family, and a nuclear family if you like where there appear to be no sexual boundaries. (George)

As alluded to earlier, several participants suggested that the behaviour might arise as a form of comfort. Melanie offered this explanation in addition to the possibility of experiencing sexual abuse:

It could just be a comfort thing, it could be that they’ve, you know, they’ve been together in a bedroom, while all sorts of violence have been happening around them, and they may have this bond whereby there’s been something, which we construe as sexual behaviour, um, that they’ve used to comfort each other. (Melanie, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy and his two year-old sister)

This explanation serves to reduce the culpability of the older boy, and somewhat incongruously with Melanie’s other descriptions, construes the behaviour as mutual. The explanation also suggests the possibility that the behaviour, while sexually expressed, is not sexually motivated. Barbara similarly suggested that the sexual behaviour might act as a form of comfort in the midst of a violent household:

Obviously, kids where there’s been domestic violence and a lot more than we know, can sometimes do that for comfort and all that. (Barbara)

Two participants considered that one of the possible explanations for the sexual behaviour was that the child was exacting revenge on an abusive parent, rather than the behaviour specifically being intended to cause harm to the sibling. In the case she discussed, Laura considered that the sexual behaviour was intended to hurt the step-mother, whom Laura perceived to have been rejecting and emotionally abusive.

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In contrast to some of the examples above of poor sexual boundaries, this was in the context of the subject of sex being taboo:

The sense that I got that he was very much like the, some unwanted, em, kind of victimised, sort of scapegoat type of figure in that, in that family.

There’s something about the family where sort of sexual activity was taboo, and it was kind of, em, had a lot of bad feelings behind it, and I think that...I don’t know how much [the boy] explicitly knew about it but there, there must have been some sort of sense that this would be something that would really damage, [the step-mother], em, and it, it really was, em, so I think in that sense it was, it was abusive, but almost it was, it was very abusive to [the step-mother].  
(Laura, discussing a 14 year-old boy’s sexual behaviour towards his 12 year-old brother)

Laura acknowledges that the sexual behaviour constituted abuse, but regarded it as abuse of the step-mother rather than there having been intention to harm the younger brother. The boy was not perceived to be a sexual abuser, rather:

He was more likely to be bullied than to bully kind of thing, he was, he was just a wee, a wee soul really. (Laura)

Among other possible factors, James speculated that one of the reasons for a boy behaving sexually towards very young siblings was to seek revenge against a parent both for her previous alleged abuse and for his having been accommodated. In this example, despite some initial hesitation to name it, James is clear in describing the behaviour as abusive of the younger siblings:

But then for him to go back into that home after being away and actually, you know, be kind of overly interested in the younger ones and, and actually abuse the younger ones, you know, that seems like he's trying to get back at his mum you know for him being put away. (James, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours by a 15 year-old boy towards his sister (aged one) and brother (aged three))

In addition to the sexual behaviour being seen as a response to the child’s own experiences of sexual or other forms of abuse, poor sexual boundaries within the

home or a combination of these factors, several participants suggested that the behaviour may have been motivated by curiosity in the context of low social confidence and few opportunities to explore sexual feelings with same-age peers.

Jenny offered this as an area of possible explanation for the behaviour:

I don't think he planned it. I think, I mean he would have been the kind of kid at school who, do you know when I was talking to you before about the house and the hygiene in the house, and that, smelly, dishevelled, um, not very attractive, overweight, the kind of kid in school that people made fun of, in fact he was, he was bullied quite chronically, um, do you know, didn't really have any friends, certainly didn't have any outlets for becoming a teenager, getting to know girls, having a girlfriend, exploration, anything like that. And I think, not that he would ever be able to put it into words himself, but I think he saw an opportunity. I think an opportunity presented itself, and I'm not sure that he would have contrived that opportunity. They'd have been playing, and I think it's quite feasible when you know him to see that as a 14 year-old he wouldn't have thought twice about playing with his nine year-old sister. That would have, do you know, he's young for his age, so I don't, you never really got the impression that he'd kind of contrived the situation and that there'd been grooming or anything really like that, it was more just, I guess an opportunity presented itself and he just, he went with it. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny draws attention to the boy's experience as a victim of chronic bullying. The boy was still a child, having no 'outlets for becoming a teenager', and his culpability and agency are further mitigated by the apparent lack of planning of the behaviour, Jenny describing the opportunities as presenting themselves rather than being actively created. The behaviour results from the lack of appropriate opportunities for "exploration". Similar explanations involving a lack of social confidence were offered by Scott, Mary and George.

For most of the social workers there were attempts to explain the sibling sexual behaviour in terms of a response to abuse experiences, poor sexual boundaries within the household, poor social skills and confidence, or a combination of these factors.

These explanations served to mitigate the perpetrator’s culpability and intention to harm the sibling. Despite the sexual behaviours taking place between siblings, only three of the 21 participants explored the possibility that the sexual behaviour might be something to do with the sibling relationship. Having explored the issue with the older brother in each case, Jenny and Mary concluded that it was not, but Karen did think that the sexual behaviour at least in part was an expression of an abusive sibling relationship:

I mean I kind of always see, see it as a kind of power thing. You know, I think that's some of the research shows that as well. That this was Liam, for whatever reason, taking, trying to take control of the situation, of his situation with his brother. Um, using sex, for want of a better phrase, to do that. You know, to, to, to exert his authority over his brother. Um, you know, he was a young person who certainly liked to be in kind of control of his own life and what he was doing. And whether he was jealous of his brother, um, you know, being the youngest, taking his mum's attention. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Karen was one of only three social workers to be allocated to work solely with the victim, the older brother having a separate social worker. Karen was unusual in being clear that the behaviour constituted abuse, and in regarding the sibling relationship itself to be abusive and to provide some explanation for the sibling sexual behaviour. Karen did not consider that these siblings should remain living together, and would like to have removed the older brother from the family home had she had the legal mandate to do so, which she believed she did not.

Most of the explanations offered by the participants drew attention to the vulnerability and victim experiences of the perpetrators, reducing their level of agency and culpability for their behaviour. If the perpetrator is a child but the victim is the child, the perpetrators also being victims meant that prioritising the needs of the victim over the perpetrator was not often straightforward. While not always a decisive influence over decision making in isolation of other considerations, the perpetrator being seen as a victim had the effect of increasing attention on their needs

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as a vulnerable child, and encouraging decision making in the direction of siblings remaining together or returning to be together. Prioritising the needs of the victim over those of the perpetrator is a rather ambiguous principle in the context of the perpetrator also being regarded as a victim.

Indeed, two participants considered the victim of the sexual behaviour not to be the primary victim in the cases they discussed and were not inclined to prioritise their needs over the perpetrator. Laura considered the perpetrator to be more of a victim than the younger brother, almost necessarily in that the boy would have to have been significantly troubled to get to the point of committing such an act. To expand on an earlier quote:

These kids aren't bad or, you know it's not because of the devil or anything like that it's, it's there for a reason and I guess just the, just to try and help, help the parents to sort of see that and to, not to just forget about the, the probably the more troubled of the, the children, that's actually kind of initiated it or is at fault or you know whatever, like there's usually somebody that gets blamed more than anybody else and I'd just be very wary of that. (Laura, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his 12 year-old brother)

Laura did not want the older boy to be blamed or judged for his behaviour and would like him to have remained at home, but it was the parents who decided that he could not stay and stopped contact with him.

Emma discussed a case in which she believed that the older boys' sexual behaviours resulted from multiple trauma including sexual abuse, and suggested that she was more concerned about the trauma that the older boys had experienced than their sexual behaviours:

Obviously sexualised behaviour concerns anybody who's involved, any professional, but, I think what I was concerned about was, more about how these boys were dealing with their trauma, but how their parents were dealing with the trauma as well. (Emma, discussing the sexual behaviours of nine and eight year-old boys towards six and five year-old brothers)

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With ongoing incidents of sexual behaviour between the siblings, Emma came under pressure to consider removing some of the children from the household. Emma considered that choosing which siblings to remove should be on the basis of who would cope better with removal, and in this sense did not prioritise the needs of the victims of the sibling sexual behaviour over those of the perpetrators:

Do we remove these kids and if we remove them who do we remove, I think we were looking at probably the younger, younger ones, maybe.

But then that threw up all sorts of kind of, the youngest one would he have coped, I don't think he would. But, it was, all relative isn't it, it's like, who would cope? Who would cope with that? Who would cope better with that. (Emma)

Emma considered that removing any of the children from the family home would have been traumatic for them, and that the siblings were better together despite concerns about ongoing sibling sexual behaviours.

With few exceptions, the participants did not consider that the children intended harm by their behaviour, at least not towards the younger siblings. Children may be victims but they are not abusers, and when children behave sexually in a way that is potentially harmful to others, there is a need to look for reasons to explain the behaviour. These reasons emphasised the perpetrators' vulnerability and victim experiences, maintaining the social workers' perspective that children are vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others. This had two corollaries. First, the relative priority given to the needs of the siblings was not solely a function of their roles in the sexual behaviour. The social workers were aware of the needs of the perpetrators as children, as victims themselves, and of the distress that could be caused to them, as it could to any child, of being separated from their families. This militated against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to remove the perpetrator from the family home, and promoted the objective of reunification in those cases where the siblings were separated. Second, the social workers might resist describing the behaviour in abusive terms.



### 5.4.2 Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse

As discussed earlier, the participants expressed confidence that they had been able to differentiate normal from concerning sibling sexual behaviour. However, they said that they found it more difficult to make sense of the behaviour beyond that, to put a label on the behaviour and to be clear about the nature and extent of the concerns the behaviour should raise:

You do think to yourself, well what is this? (Barbara)

Is it abuse? Is it exploration? I don't know. (Liz)

The literature review noted that while there is no universally agreed definition of sibling sexual abuse, common criteria include use of force or other coercion, and power imbalances such as through large differences of age, size, or cognitive ability. While these were exactly the criteria the participants said they used to differentiate developmentally normal from concerning sexual behaviour, they were not used consistently to interpret the behaviour as abusive.

Melanie illustrates this when discussing a case involving a brother eight years older than his sister, therefore with power imbalances of age, size, and cognitive ability.

Melanie suggested a number of possibilities to explain the behaviour:

Was it, was it that he had witnessed, was it, had he been sexually abused himself, had he witnessed sexual abuse of his mum, which we kind of thought was possibly quite likely, or was it behaviours that were being triggered by other types of, you know, emotional abuse, and it was triggering that type of behaviour within him, so, I don't think anybody had ever, um, a concrete view of, what the cause was, but certainly, there never ever was any kind of sense that he was being blamed, um, or was a perpetrator. (Melanie, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy and his two year-old sister)

Melanie was sure that the older brother had experienced some form of abuse, and in that sense she regarded him as a victim. While she identified the brother as initiating the behaviour, she resisted suggestions from others that he be regarded as a perpetrator, or a sexual abuser. Melanie was concerned about a foster carer referring

to the boy as a “child abuser”, and similarly rejected the behaviour being described as abuse:

Particularly the male carer started to use words like, child abuser, or, he was abusing her and we had to keep going back to him and saying, that’s your perception that’s he’s abusing but, we’re not saying these behaviours are right or desirable in any way and they need to be worked on but, you know, we don’t want him labelled as an abuser because there could be a whole context to this we don’t understand. (Melanie)

Melanie’s belief that the boy’s sexual behaviour could be explained by his own probable experiences of sexual or other abuse meant that she held him less culpable for his behaviour, did not think that blame should be attached to him, and furthermore resisted describing his behaviour as abuse. For Melanie, describing the behaviour as abuse implied the boy was an abuser. To the extent that the boy’s behaviour led to his removal from the home, it was because it did not feel possible to prevent further behaviour from occurring in that environment. Contact between the siblings was maintained.

Given the lack of consensus over what constitutes sibling sexual abuse, there is no way objectively as a researcher to judge whether a specific piece of behaviour such as discussed by Melanie should or should not be described as abuse. However, there are three clear examples of the participants acknowledging during the course of the interview that the behaviour did indeed constitute abuse, but being reluctant to use this term to describe the behaviour.

When asked how she interpreted the behaviour, Jenny acknowledged that it was abusive but recognised that this was not the label that she had been attaching to the behaviour, indicating discomfort in doing so:

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I’m not sure that I would ever use the word abusive, even though I would have known that it was, which is interesting isn’t it? But I almost get, like you think of the word abusive and you almost. I don’t know, I mean, god, it was abusive, but I think inappropriate would have been the word that would have been used, and again I’m trying to think back, but, do you know his inappropriate understanding of the world, his inappropriate behav-, do you know, yeah, I think that would have been the word. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny preferred the term ‘inappropriate’, which as we have seen is also a term used to describe sexual behaviour which is developmentally expected and may cause no harm. What the term ‘abusive’ conjured up for Jenny was left unsaid, but my interpretation in the context of this interview as a whole is that the term ‘abuse’ implied too much deliberate intention to harm than she wanted to apply to this boy, whom she was clear in describing as a vulnerable and victimised child. Jenny seemed not to wish to imply that this boy was a sexual abuser. Jenny described the boy as likeable, a boy who elicited the support of adults, and who took responsibility for his behaviour by admitting it and working hard to address it:

He had this way that adults really felt for him, so even though he couldn’t kind of relate to his own peers, adults really felt that they wanted to do right by him.

He’s the kind of, I mean, he worked really hard and for a time I mean he saw me maybe twice a week, and never missed appointments, and do you know was really, really very good. (Jenny)

Not only was the boy reliable in keeping appointments, not only did he work hard, he was “really very good”, a good boy, not a sexual abuser.

Fiona and Ruth described a case involving the rape of a seven year-old boy by his 12 year-old brother. Later in the interview Ruth acknowledged that they did regard the behaviour as abuse, and that this view was shared by the older brother. However, when asked initially how the behaviour was interpreted, Fiona responded by saying:

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I think at the time we were mindful that we didn’t know the family, and so at the time I don’t think we could’ve put, or I certainly couldn’t have put any kind of label or whatever at that time. (Fiona)

Fiona did not want to put a label on the behaviour until she had got to know not only the child involved, but the whole family. Labelling of the behaviour hinged not only on the nature of the behaviour, or on criteria such as age or power differences, but some understanding of the child. Fiona needed to know the child before labelling the behaviour. At the point in time that Fiona was reluctant to label the behaviour, she had formed a positive initial impression of the boy:

I was really impressed with the young man that [night], really even although that was our first meeting, and given the type of work that we do and the children that we meet and blah, blah, blah, I remember coming away from that meeting being, in a context, being really impressed through his grief, through just about the ownership for the, the vulnerability of his age, the, you know, we work, don’t we, we come across adults, how many, in our careers that don’t take responsibility like that in their twenties, thirties, fifties, whatever, but I came away on a human level thinking, I was really kind of, the expression that’s in my head that I was not, I’m resisting to use for the tape is, I was a big fan of his. (Fiona)

Fiona liked this boy, and experienced him as vulnerable, remorseful and emotional in response to the allegations of rape being made. Fiona did not want to label the behaviour at that time, and was clear that her response to his presentation had a significant influence upon the decision to allow him to remain at home.

As a final example, Liz described a case of a 14 year-old girl who engaged in sexual behaviours with several of her siblings. Liz grappled with the issue of how to make sense of the behaviour throughout the interview, vacillating between describing the behaviour as abuse and as experimentation, trying hard to hold on to an interpretation of the behaviour as experimentation:

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But I always kind of felt that it was more ex-,  
experimentation than, sexual abuse as such, I don't feel like  
she sought them out and groomed them or anything like that.  
And it did seem, well, maybe it wasn't a one-off, we don't  
know. But, I think just that her boundaries were so skewed as  
well, and she was outwardly sexual all, all the time, that it  
was, but then, I know it's sexual abuse but it did still seem  
more, I don't, I think in her wee, in her head, I'm not sure  
whether she'd got any satisfaction out of it as such, if you  
know what I mean. (Liz)

Liz starts by regarding the behaviour as experimentation, differentiating the  
behaviour from sexual abuse on the basis that it appeared to lack planning and to be a  
single rather than a repeated incident, albeit that this remained uncertain. Repetition  
was a criterion the social workers used not only to differentiate appropriate from  
inappropriate behaviour, but also inappropriate from abusive behaviour. Liz draws  
attention to the girl's victim experiences and her resultant skewed sexual boundaries.  
For Liz, this girl's behaviour could be explained in terms of her victim experiences.  
Liz acknowledges that the behaviour constituted sexual abuse, but immediately  
retracts this on the basis that she did not think that the girl was seeking sexual  
gratification 'in her wee head'. There was no intention to harm. Liz knows that this is  
sexual abuse, but then does not know because this is a child. Towards the end of the  
interview Liz was still unsure:

I don't know, was it ex-, I don't know. It seems bad saying it  
was just experimentation, because it's much more than that, if  
you, I know if, it's much, much more than that, it is abuse.  
But I don't mean for me, I meant, I mean for her. (Liz)

Liz appeared to be trying to manage the impression she was making upon me as the  
researcher, not wanting me to think that she was minimising the seriousness of the  
behaviour by regarding it as experimentation. She believed that the behaviour had the  
potential to be harmful to the younger siblings and in that sense was abuse, but Liz  
did not think that the girl had the intention of harming the younger siblings or of  
deriving sexual gratification at their expense. The behaviour may have been abuse,  
but Liz did not think of the girl as an abuser. Liz summarised her dilemma:

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Should they have contact? Should they not have contact? Is  
it abuse? Is it exploration? I don't know. (Liz)

Liz struggled to make sense of the behaviour, and makes a direct link between her uncertainty over how to label the behaviour with the decision about whether or not these siblings should have contact with each other. Labelling the behaviour as exploration rather than abuse would tip the balance of decision making in favour of the siblings having contact, and of returning to live together.

When discussing cases in which the children involved were regarded as taking the roles of perpetrator and victim, most of the social workers resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse and instead used terms like ‘inappropriate’, ‘exploratory’, ‘experimental’, and ‘sexualised’ to describe the sibling sexual behaviour. These were also the words that they used to describe developmentally normal and harmless behaviour, the term ‘sexualised’ emphasising the perpetrator’s experiences as a victim. This seems to reflect a general reluctance to regard children as sexual abusers, as having the intention to cause sexual harm, or knowingly to derive sexual gratification at another child’s expense. Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse helped to maintain the social workers’ perspective that children are vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others. The characteristics of the behaviour did not determine how the behaviour was interpreted; rather the social workers wanted to get to know the child before labelling the behaviour. Emotional, remorseful and likeable children were not the kinds of children who would sexually abuse other children, and their behaviour was not generally labelled as abuse.

For some social workers such as Liz, the resistance to labelling the behaviour as abuse reflected a genuine struggle to make sense of the behaviour in the context of the perpetrator being a child, and to influence the decision making in favour of the siblings being together. For other social workers, resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse was a conscious attempt to avoid the child being stigmatised as a sexual abuser.

#### 5.4.2.1 Avoiding stigmatising language

Some of the participants were clear that they were careful about how they labelled the behaviour because they did not want to stigmatise the perpetrator as an abuser, either in terms of others’ perceptions or the child’s sense of themselves. This was illustrated earlier by the extracts from the interview with Melanie (see onwards from page 141).

Similarly, Barbara would only go as far as to say that the behaviour was ‘a wee bit more than experimenting’, because she was concerned not to give a message to the boy that he was “bad”:

Peter: Do you have an idea of what kind of word you would use to characterise the behaviour?

Barbara: No, well at that, you know, at that point in time that's what I was trying to, you know, give the message to the older one, that you know, that, you know he wasn't bad...Um, but you know, as much as I didn't, think it was experimenting, I thought it was a wee bit more than that, you know, I was really, I know at that point in time when I was doing that, it was um, you know, I was trying not to give over that message, you know. (Barbara, discussing a case involving a seven year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

Barbara was concerned that labelling the behaviour would imply a label for the boy, that it would suggest a moral judgement on his character as being the kind of person who would behave in this way.

Emma also made a conscious attempt to avoid using language that could stigmatise eight and nine year-old boys who had engaged in oral sex with their six and five year-old brothers:

So, you know the language that, I'm trying to think of the language that we would have been using was, really trying not to create blame or shame for these, for these little kids. (Emma)

Rather like Liz highlighting the girl as a child having a ‘wee head’, and Laura talking about the boy being a “wee soul”, Emma talked about “these little kids”, emphasising that the older brothers were still young children. Emma used terms like “sexualised behaviour” to describe the sibling sexual behaviour, thereby simultaneously avoiding the implication of blame and connecting the boys’ own experiences of sexual abuse to their behaviour, which the social worker regarded as how their “traumatic experience was coming out.” (Emma).

It is possible that for some of the social workers, labelling the behaviour was purely an issue of semantics. Knowing that the behaviour was wrong and potentially harmful might be sufficient to make decisions about living and contact arrangements, and the label of abuse was resisted consciously and solely to avoid the perpetrator being labelled as an abuser. Further weight is given to this interpretation in that different terms were sometimes used in different contexts.

#### **5.4.2.2 Applying different terms in different contexts**

Different terms were sometimes used to describe the sexual behaviour according to the relationship the social workers had to the victim and perpetrator, and according to the contextual argument that the social worker was trying to make at the time.

Participants who mostly referred to the behaviour as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘exploratory’ in the context of talking about the perpetrator, sometimes referred to the same behaviour as ‘abuse’ in the context of talking about the victim’s needs. When Jenny recounted talking with the parents about the need for the victim not to sleep in the perpetrator’s bedroom when he was away, she referred to the behaviour as abuse:

So I’d say to them well, ‘right so she’s going to be sleeping in the room where the abuse happened, and it’s the bedroom of the person who abused her’, and I probably wouldn’t have used the word abuse because that wouldn’t have been helpful for them at the time, they knew what I meant, um, and they’d kind of go, ‘oh right yeah I see your point’. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)



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Ruth similarly referred to the behaviour as ‘sexualised’ when talking about the perpetrator, and as abuse when talking about the victim:

We also began work with [specialist service for children with harmful sexual behaviour], um, with Phil, obviously to explore his sexualised behaviour and things.

Well I think just given what had happened and the feelings of shame and things that Phil was carrying, also the trauma for Gordon, you know, of having been abused. (Ruth, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

As a final example, having generally referred to the behaviour as ‘inappropriate’, Penny referred to the behaviour as ‘abuse’ when discussing the safety needs of the younger siblings:

There was an element where, (4 seconds) that Audrey, in particular, was, was, doing these things to the other children when there wasn’t other adults about, so as long as there was an adult about and contact was supervised, um, there wasn’t the option, for Audrey to, abuse her sibling, whilst contact was taking place. (Penny, discussing a case involving a seven year-old girl’s sexual behaviours towards sisters aged six and three, and a brother aged one)

While the label of abuse to describe the behaviour was generally resisted, the social workers were less reluctant to describe the behaviour as abuse in the context of talking about the victim’s needs. This further illustrates the social workers’ perspective of children: they may be abused, but they may not abuse.

As a corollary to the label of abuse being applied more readily to the behaviour in the context of discussing the victim’s needs, it was also more likely to be applied when the social worker had little or no direct contact with the perpetrator. In all but three cases the participant was allocated either to the perpetrator only, or to the perpetrator and victim. In those three cases where the participant was allocated to the victim only, the behaviour was labelled by two of those participants as abuse. In the third case, discussed by Kate, the sexual behaviour took place between young children, and was described variously as ‘inappropriate’ and ‘sexual assault’. In the case

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discussed by Karen, the perpetrator took no responsibility for the behaviour and denied it had happened:

I think he might have had his own supervision order. So I never took, huge amount to do with him, because [social worker] was involved and, you know he was doing that. And he was obviously very aware of, you know, what had happened, the allegations, um, and did try and do a bit of work with Liam on it. But, he just, really wasn't for, discussing it. And there was no kind of opportunity to sort of do any work there. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Similarly, in a case discussed by Lisa where Lisa had no contact with the perpetrator, the behaviour was labelled as abuse. Again the perpetrator apparently took little responsibility for the behaviour beyond admitting that it had happened:

I'm just more, kind of, thinking about even kind of Scott's lack of engagement as well. I don't think he engaged particularly well with the [specialist service for children with harmful sexual behaviour]. (Lisa, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old brother)

It is difficult to know to what extent the behaviour was labelled as abuse due to the perpetrators' not taking responsibility, coupled with their age, or to the social workers' lack of relationship with the perpetrator. Behaviour involving rape was not always immediately labelled as abusive. There was some limited evidence that senior managers more removed from the case, with no direct contact with either the victims or perpetrators, were more likely to label the behaviour as abuse, where the social worker involved had resisted such a label. In the case discussed by Emma, where Emma referred to the behaviour generally as “sexualised”, Emma said that her managers referred to the behaviour as “abuse”. Emma noted that different professionals referred to the behaviour using different terms:

I think people had different descriptions. And that's what we really needed to get a handle on. (Emma)

Emma commented on the debates the involved professionals had over the decision making in this case, their different descriptions highlighting different interpretations

of the behaviour and therefore different responses in terms of whether or not the siblings should remain living together. There is a possibility that involved professionals acting solely on behalf of the victim or with a more distant relationship to the perpetrator may be less resistant to labelling the behaviour as abuse and therefore more inclined to countenance the separation of the siblings.

What this also suggests is that the labelling of the behaviour cannot simply be dismissed as always purely a matter of semantics, but may reflect genuine differences in interpretation of the behaviour. Most of the participants resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse, but there were some exceptions.

### **5.4.3 Labelling the behaviour as abuse**

Where the perpetrator was viewed by the social worker as the kind of person who was capable of sexually abusing another child, it was more likely that the behaviour would be labelled as abuse. In particular, children whom the social workers perceived to express no remorse and no emotion in response to allegations of sibling sexual behaviour risked being labelled as an abuser, and possibly risked losing the label of child.

Brian described a case of a 15 year-old boy behaving sexually towards his four year-old sister. Like the other social workers Brian did not want to jump to a conclusion that this boy was a sexual abuser, and would like to have understood the reasons underlying his behaviour:

I mean we didn't just rush to, I didn't just rush to say, you know, ok, you're an abuser, you know, that kind of stuff, we needed to get an understanding of his understanding of what he did, er, why he did it, um, and we could never get that because he had been told not to say anything and not to speak to us. (Brian)

After initially resisting labelling the boy as an abuser, once Brian got to know him he described the boy as just the kind of person capable of sexually abusing a child:

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He, I'd say he, he, he has an easy-going manner, but very withdrawn, very, you know, not aloof but just kind of cold. Um, it was the, the first thing that jumped into my mind was, you know, this is a psychopath in the making, because of his, his, his kind of detachment, the level of detachment from reality and what was happening to him... You know, this was a boy who, who demonstrated to me that he could be capable of that and more. Um, and that's one of the things that worried me. (Brian)

Brian was clear that the behaviour constituted sexual abuse, and went on to say that this boy was not really a child:

Now, I know children have various defences and, and stuff like that. But he wasn't a child, he was a, a, a teenager. (Brian)

There was less tension for the social workers in the idea of a teenager being a sexual abuser than in the idea of a younger child being a sexual abuser. In those cases where the behaviour was labelled as abuse, all of the perpetrators were at least 12 years old. In all of the cases where the perpetrator was under that age the behaviour was labelled using terms like ‘inappropriate’, ‘exploratory’ or ‘experimental’. I do not wish to suggest an exact age boundary, but it seemed that the behaviour of younger children was less likely to be labelled as abuse than the behaviour of older children, particularly older children described using terms like ‘teenager’, who are not yet adults but are perhaps no longer children either.

Scott did not hesitate to label the behaviour as abuse when discussing a case of a 13 year-old boy who had raped his six year-old brother. Scott indicated that prior to this abuse becoming known the boy was already regarded as being capable of committing such an act. A joint investigation by police and social work had previously been carried out due to a worry that the boy may have acted sexually towards his younger brothers. When one of the younger brothers later disclosed the sexual abuse, it came as no surprise to the social worker involved:

I think in terms of what happened between Steven and Paul, and [what] had occurred previously where an understanding of penetration and, and I suppose satisfaction, I suppose attached to that, that was where the concern was, yeah, that's probably quite clear. That he had previously shown an understanding of these things. We knew that, that he may try to attempt...(Scott)

In contrast to Liz's account discussed above, Scott considered that part of the older brother's motivation for his behaviour was sexual gratification, and that the behaviour showed intention. Scott did not consider the older brother to have shown any remorse or empathy for his younger brother, and was thought actively to dislike him, continuing to engage in potentially harmful physical behaviours during later contact visits. While Scott made every effort to meet the needs of the older brother as a child, he nonetheless regarded him as the kind of boy capable of abuse, labelled the behaviour as such, and did not consider that the boy could remain living at home with his younger siblings.

James provided a similar example of a 13 year-old boy, whose sexual behaviour towards his younger sisters aged eight and six was preceded by charges of sexual assault of two children in the community. Like the boys discussed by Scott and Brian, this boy was perceived to show no remorse. He had demonstrated to James that he was the kind of person capable of sexual abuse prior to the behaviour towards his sisters, and for James there was no question of the behaviour towards the siblings constituting anything other than abuse.

From their perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, it was difficult for the social workers to make sense of the sexual behaviour and to know how concerned to be about it. The social workers used clear criteria for differentiating exploratory from harmful sexual behaviour, but resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse because they did not want to label, or even think about, the child as a sexual abuser. This was particularly true for social workers who had a relationship with the child, where the child was young, and where the child was perceived as emotional and remorseful in response to allegations. Social workers

were less resistant to labelling the behaviour as abuse when they had no relationship with the child, when the child was older and regarded as unremorseful. How the behaviour was labelled hinged not so much on the characteristics of the behaviour, but on the social worker’s relationship with the child and judgement of their character. Differences in language among the involved professionals appeared to reflect different interpretations of the behaviour. There was some evidence that labelling the behaviour as ‘inappropriate’, ‘experimental’ or ‘sexualised’ was not always an issue of semantics, but reflected social workers’ sense-making of the behaviour and influenced decision making in favour of siblings being together. There was only a small number of social workers who did not resist labelling the behaviour as abuse, but who nonetheless did not label the perpetrator as an abuser.

#### **5.4.3.1 Separating the labelling of the behaviour from the child**

There were just three social workers who separated the labelling of the behaviour from the labelling of the child. They did not resist labelling the behaviour as abuse, but nonetheless did not label the perpetrator as an abuser.

Laura described a case where a 14 year-old boy had sexually abused his 12 year-old brother. Laura was clear that the behaviour was abusive, but tempered this by arguing that the behaviour was not intended to be abusive of the younger brother, but of the parent:

Em, certainly abusive. I wouldn’t have described it as consensual. I wouldn’t have, I wouldn’t have, I don’t think that he ever meant to, to sort of hurt David or cause him discomfort, I think it was more about how it would make other people feel.

There must have been some sort of sense that this would be something that would really damage, her, em, and it, it really was, em, so I think in that sense it was, it was abusive, but almost it was, it was very abusive to [name of parent].  
(Laura)

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Laura maintained a position that the boy had not intended sexual harm to his younger brother; he was a likeable and vulnerable child, a victim of his parent’s lack of love and care:

He was such a nice kid. He was lovely, em, but, just damaged, which is a shame. (Laura)

Mary similarly separated the label of abuse for the behaviour from the label of abuser for the perpetrator, in this case being clear that the abuse was of the younger sibling. Mary said some slightly contradictory things, including the idea that a young person may be an abuser temporarily at the time of the behaviour, but could relinquish that label in time. Mary also said that young people might be abusers if they were persistent in their sexual offending and remained a risk to other children. Mary is a youth justice social worker with considerable training and experience in working with children with harmful sexual behaviour. It is possible that her perspective of children is different from most other social workers, and there may be less tension in the idea of a ‘young person’, rather than a child, committing acts of abuse. In the particular case we discussed, of a 12 year-old boy and a four year-old sister, Mary was clear that the behaviour constituted abuse because of the nature of the behaviour and the potential impact on the victim:

I think it was the nature of the offence. In the way he forced her mouth open. That's what I've always gone by. I go by, um, force. He knew it was wrong, despite the fact that he has these some developmental delays and he knew that was wrong.

It's abuse. It was definitely abuse. And that sounds bad, because you think, do you know, no, I think it's definitely abuse. I don't think we can name it much else really. I think the significance and the long-term effects, um, on the victim is there. (Mary)

In the way that Liz was worried that it might ‘sound bad’ to regard the behaviour in the case she discussed as experimentation, Mary expresses a similar sentiment when describing the behaviour as abuse. Mary wanted me to be clear that her describing

the behaviour as abuse did not mean that she regarded the perpetrator as an abuser, or that it in any way undermined her regard for him as a person:

I see them as young people first. But I see the actual act as being abuse. And the reason I see it as being abuse is because the impact that that can have on the victim.

So, do you know, in that sense it sounds like me saying that's abuse as maybe having a negative effect on the, the young person. I didn't see that. You have to name it. That doesn't mean to say that you have any less value or opinion of that young person, because I certainly don't.

I don't see them from, as an abuser. I see the act as being abuse. (Mary)

For Mary, committing an act of abuse and the behaviour being labelled as such does not make the young person an abuser. Mary separates the labelling of the behaviour from the character of the child.

Separating the labelling of the behaviour from the character of the child was not a trait confined to experienced youth justice social workers, as this quote from a newly qualified children and families social worker exemplifies:

I don't think you can do your job properly if you sort of really think that you know they are horrible. What they did was horrible, but then you can't, you can't pin that on the person themselves. (Angela)

This takes us back to the beginning of this overall section. However they labelled the behaviour and the child, almost all of the social workers made a conscious and self-reflexive effort to continue to regard the perpetrator as a child with needs, and to work professionally to the best of their ability to try to meet those needs.

## 5.5 Conclusion

I have argued throughout this chapter that the social workers maintained an underlying perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others. This view of children was challenged by the sibling sexual behaviour coming to light. The social workers maintained their perspective by doubting that the



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behaviour had happened, looking for reasons to understand the behaviour, resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse, and seeing it as their professional responsibility to make a conscious and self-reflexive effort to continue to see the perpetrator as a vulnerable child with needs which require to be met.

‘Child’ appeared to be deployed as a spectrum concept. Young children are more ‘child’ than older children. Victims are more ‘child’ than perpetrators. Emotional and remorseful children are more ‘child’ than unremorseful children. The social workers might have an instinct to prioritise the needs of the victim over the needs of the perpetrator, but prioritising was a matter of degree not a binary choice. The closer the social workers’ relationship to the perpetrator, and the more ‘child’ the perpetrator, the more the social workers resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse and the more finely balanced the prioritising of the perpetrator’s and victim’s needs. While not necessarily on its own conclusive in the decision making, maintaining a perspective of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others militated against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate the siblings, therefore contributing to the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’.



## **Chapter 6: Maintaining an underlying perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value**

### **6.1 Introduction**

See again I wouldn't even know if I would call it physical abuse. There was certainly physical aggression between the two of them in the relationship and he's bigger, and so there-, and he's older, so he partly should have known better and he shoul-, there was power issues that he, didn't really take into account because, I mean you see it amongst siblings all the time well it's my sister and they're doing my head in and I'm going to, do you know what I mean, so there was certainly inappropriate physical aggression, but I think it was two-way, um, but you could argue that he's bigger, and do you know those kin-, you could argue about those kind of things if you wanted. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

In the context of discussing the criteria for judging the sexual behaviour between these two siblings as concerning, Jenny was confronted with her assumption that the physical aggression between them constituted normal sibling behaviour. This quote was typical of the things participants said about the sibling relationships in the cases they discussed, the sexual behaviour aside. Despite an age difference of five years between this brother and sister and a considerable size difference, Jenny was reluctant to couch the physical aggression, the punching, the hitting and the kicking, in abusive terms. It was seen as fighting, two-way, something that brothers and sisters do. Rather than using phrases like physical abuse or bullying to describe physical aggression between siblings with large age and size differences, the social workers typically regarded it as mutual behaviour. This sentiment was echoed by a number of participants:

But they've got a very difficult relationship, the 15 year-old and 11 year-old, still. They, they fight like nothing else.

That kind of usual sibling, kind of, roughing each other up and, and so to speak and, you're this and you're that. But the

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ver-, what's very clear, is that they're very close and very protective of each other.

Fighting, boys will fight, you know, and we needed to be mindful of that. You know, there's a degree of, this is what families do. (Emma)

Scott quoted from case notes, which recorded that the older brother's "poor attitude" towards his siblings was seen as normal teenage behaviour:

No concerns in relation to Steven who appeared to be carrying out normal teenage behaviour, defiance and poor attitude towards siblings and mother. (Scott)

This poor attitude included physical aggression towards his younger brother by seven years, which caused injury and had the potential to exacerbate the younger brother's already worrying health difficulties.

This reluctance to think about physical aggression between siblings in abusive or bullying terms did not extend to unrelated children. Annette spoke about the younger sister in her case bullying other children at school. Jenny, Ruth, Laura, and Emma all spoke about physical aggression between children at school in terms of bullying, and James used the term 'abusive' when referring to physical aggression displayed towards other children by the young person with whom he worked:

There wasn't, again, the school report that he was involved in, you know, abusive behaviour towards other young people and, you know, his kind of history within education wasn't that great, quite a few exclusions and that as well over the course of time. (James)

Barbara was the only participant to talk about bullying in the context of the sibling relationship. When discussing some house rules the children had agreed, Barbara appeared to quote language used by the children, which she almost immediately revised to 'fighting':

Aye, there was no bullying. There was no swearing. There was like no pulling of hair. I mean there was no fighting and no pulling of hair. (Barbara)

I will return to this extract later in the chapter.

While the social workers spoke about physical aggression at school in terms of abuse and bullying, they were reluctant to think about the sibling relationship in abusive terms.

I argued in the previous chapter that the participants were disinclined to regard children as sexual abusers and this often translated into being resistant to construe the sibling sexual behaviour in abusive terms. Maintaining a perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others militated against any straightforward decisions to separate siblings, influencing decision making in favour of siblings being together. Maintaining a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value added to the social workers’ difficulties in making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour and their resistance to labelling the behaviour as abuse. I will argue that the social workers’ reluctance to think about the sibling relationship in abusive terms meant that the sibling sexual behaviour was treated in isolation from the relationship, not as a part of the relationship or in any way representative of the relationship dynamic. For most of the social workers, as long as the sexual behaviour stopped, there was an almost unconditional belief in the benefits of maintaining the relationship between the siblings, without any need to intervene to ameliorate the quality of the sibling relationship.

There are four processes through which this perspective of sibling relationships was demonstrated. Some of these processes also relate to a perspective of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, and to a perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective, which I will explore in the next chapter. It is sometimes difficult to disentangle which processes specifically relate to sibling relationships, but I have chosen to include these processes in this chapter because taken together they demonstrate most clearly a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive, and a view that sibling relationships have value and should be maintained almost no matter what behaviours may have taken place between the siblings.

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First, the social workers looked for reasons to explain the sibling sexual behaviour, these reasons rarely including the quality of the sibling relationship among the possible explanations of the behaviour. The social workers did not generally consider that the sibling sexual behaviour could be a manifestation of an abusive sibling relationship. I discussed this in the previous chapter and will not revisit it here. Second, the social workers required at least a second incident of sibling sexual behaviour before considering that siblings needed to be separated or contact stopped. One incident did not seem sufficient to consider that the behaviour, or indeed the sibling relationship, might be abusive and therefore provide grounds to interrupt the relationship. Third, when it came to sibling sexual behaviour most of the social workers considered safety in terms of immediate physical and sexual safety, rather than emotional or psychological safety. Focusing on safety in those terms precluded a consideration in the decision making of the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour, which was therefore not regarded as having any consequences for the quality of the ongoing sibling relationship. Very few of the social workers reported trying to improve the dynamics of the sibling relationship. Fourth, if siblings were separated or contact stopped, the social workers did not see this as a long-term solution. Social workers anticipated that siblings would reunite and therefore worked towards reunification while they remained involved. In addition, it seemed that others involved in the decision making processes might also maintain a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, and that siblings’ interests are therefore best served by being together. Some social workers described that when they advocated for siblings not to have contact, they came under considerable pressure from other professionals to change their minds. There was some limited evidence that these pressures might be less intense regarding decisions about contact with parents. Social workers may perceive families as better together, but their perspective of siblings as better together is especially strong.

Having already discussed ‘Looking for reasons’, I will concentrate here on exploring the latter processes in more depth.

## 6.2 Requiring a second incident

Of all the groupings of sibling sexual behaviour discussed by the participants, there were no examples of a social worker deciding that siblings should be separated on the basis of a single incident, no matter what the sexual behaviour entailed or how it was labelled. At least a second incident was always required.

Requiring a second incident may partly be due to the social workers’ maintaining a perspective of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, therefore being resistant to labelling the behaviour as abuse and reluctant to remove a child from their family on the basis of a single incident. The previous chapter highlighted that repetition was a criterion social workers frequently cited to help them differentiate appropriate from inappropriate sibling sexual behaviour. Believing that the behaviour had occurred only once also supported labelling the behaviour as inappropriate or experimental rather than as abuse. If the social workers were uncertain about how to make sense of the behaviour on the basis of a single incident, this would support siblings remaining together.

Requiring a second incident may also be connected with maintaining a perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective, wishing to give such parents another chance to keep their children together. If parents are regarded as well-intentioned protective, the kind of parents who would want to try to protect their children, the social workers would be reluctant to remove any children from their care on the basis of a single incident of sibling sexual behaviour. I will explore how parents come to be regarded as well-intentioned protective in the next chapter.

I will argue in this chapter that requiring a second incident may also be due to the social workers’ maintaining a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value. This perspective further discourages the sibling sexual behaviour being construed as abuse, and social workers may be reluctant to intervene to interrupt a sibling relationship assumed to be valuable on the basis of a single incident. Whatever the underlying basis for requiring a second incident before

separating siblings, it seems clear that the requirement serves to support siblings remaining together.

## 6.3 Focusing on safety

I guess the, the general principle is to keep children at home  
unless it's, it's not safe. (Laura)

Laura expressed a view very common among the participants, that children should remain living at home, living with or having contact with their siblings, unless it was not safe to do so. For most of the participants safety was conceptualised as immediate physical and sexual safety, in other words preventing the recurrence of any physical injury or sexual behaviour. It was rare that the participants included ideas about emotional safety. Only a minority of the participants voiced a consideration of the impact, and particularly the possible emotional impact, of the sibling sexual behaviour when making decisions about separation, contact, and reunification. This is not to say that the participants necessarily believed that the sexual behaviour had no emotional impact or that they did not offer emotional support to the victim; rather the emotional impact was associated with the sexual behaviour in isolation and was not seen to impinge upon or result from the quality of the sibling relationship. The emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour was therefore extraneous to the social workers' decision making. For most of the participants, as long as the sexual behaviour could be prevented from recurring, there was no reason to intervene in the sibling relationship.

### 6.3.1 Taking no account of the possible emotional impact

There are a number of useful examples from the interviews, which help to illustrate this focus on safety to the preclusion of a consideration of the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour. Fiona decided initially that the brothers in the case she discussed could remain living at home because she believed the mother would ensure their immediate safety. Echoing Laura's quote above, Fiona expressed the view that if there are ways for children to be safe at home then that is where they should remain:



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If the kids can be at home that’s where they will remain, if we can get supports in to make that safe and blah blah blah, then that’s what we do, but if not I’d be the first get them out, that’s not where I was on the day. (Fiona, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his 7 year-old brother)

It became clear that by ‘safe’ Fiona was referring to immediate physical and sexual safety. Fiona did not express that the decision making had included a consideration of how she thought the victim might cope emotionally with continuing to live with his older brother, who was said to have raped him:

There was a woman here who ticked all the boxes in terms of, at that stage, in terms of the immediate safety for both boys but especially [victim], and it was out in the extended family, so I kind of think in my own view, it was very much, on balance certainly over the next few days up until the case conference, let’s keep the boys kind of at home. (Fiona)

Fiona considered the mother to be able to keep the children safe in the terms discussed, prioritising the safety of the victim in particular, on the basis that the mother “ticked all the boxes”. I will say more about how parents “ticked all the boxes” and came to be regarded as well-intentioned protective in the next chapter. Focusing on safety served to support a decision to keep the brothers together, and a second incident was required to challenge the perceived safety of the situation.

While the participants were not always confident that further sibling sexual behaviour could be prevented in the context of siblings continuing to live together, in almost all cases they thought that further sexual behaviour could be prevented during contact if that contact was supervised. The only exception was a case discussed by James, where at least two incidents of sexual abuse took place during supervised contact, contact being stopped only after the second time an incident was witnessed.

With further incidents being regarded as preventable by contact being supervised, almost all of the participants considered that contact should take place between the siblings. Perhaps the most powerful evidence of a focus on safety to the exclusion of a consideration of the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour came from the

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decisions social workers made around contact. It was generally assumed that contact should be maintained, with social workers seeming to perceive some intrinsic value in the sibling relationship. Liz commented as follows:

If social work are supervising it, it would be seen as well, nothing's going to, and you have to allow them contact of some sort to maintain relationships, I presume. (Liz)

Sharon agreed when Penny expressed this view:

The feeling was that it wasn't sexualised behaviours that couldn't be managed, um, by the adults around about, then, that contact was, was OK. (Penny)

Liz and Penny took the view that as long as the sexual behaviour could be prevented from recurring, the sibling relationship should be maintained through face-to-face contact. The unquestioned assumption of the importance of maintaining the sibling relationship is further illustrated by Fiona, Ruth and Barbara:

Fiona: If I look back and think well what was my kind of, er, you know, what underpinned the decision making. I kind of think it very much was a kind of culture of, or my culture of just keeping the kind of family con-=

Ruth: =Just wanting him to see him, yeah. (Fiona and Ruth, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Peter: How was it decided that they should be spending some time together?

Barbara: Well, they had always, and they had never not. You know, it was never um, it's just really important for children to have contact with each other. Um, and they'd never not. (Barbara, discussing a case involving a seven year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

For these participants the sibling sexual behaviour that had taken place did not impinge upon this view. There was some limited evidence, as we will see later, that this view was especially strong when the siblings lived and had grown up together,

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but weaker when the siblings had not grown up together or were living apart.

Whether the siblings were full or half siblings did not seem to make any difference.

Scott expressed an assumed value in maintaining the sibling relationship, and in reflecting upon what had been achieved in the case he discussed, invoked the concept of safety in terms of any recurrence of the sibling sexual behaviour:

I haven't really stopped to think well what progress have we made. But, yes, if there's a big one then it is we've kept Paul safe. You know, and maybe that is, is, the great success. Nothing's happened again. (Scott, discussing a case involving a 13 year-old boy and his six year-old brother)

Through the course of the interview Scott reflected that the emotional safety of the younger boy had not been given sufficient consideration in the decision to maintain contact between the brothers, again making the assumption that the sibling relationship should be maintained. Responding to a question about why he had wanted the siblings to maintain contact, Scott commented:

There was no evidence at the time of contact being damaging. I suppose or, although what had happened was very serious and actually probably was quite traumatic for Paul, erm. We didn't stop to question these things. That's what I'm thinking just now. We didn't, yeah.

I don't know why we didn't, I know Peter, it's a good, it's a good question, because I think our thinking was about maintaining this bond...I didn't stop to think whether contact was appropriate or not. I just assumed that it would be important to maintain a bond that, I suppose, quite optimistically thinking, and again, my managers have a huge say in this. It wasn't my decision in essence to make. But my opinion at the time, probably, was about nurturing a bond, about trying to (exhales), I suppose, keep a bond whereby we could healthily address what had occurred, knowing, and I suppose making an assumption that Steven had made a mistake. And that that could be resolved. (Scott)

In this extract Scott appears to be challenged by my question about why he wanted contact between the siblings to be maintained, never having questioned this himself before. He had assumed that maintaining a bond between the siblings would be

important as long as there was no risk of the sexual behaviour recurring. However, with this assumption challenged Scott makes an attempt to distance himself from the decision, saying that it was not his to make. He goes on to justify the decision to maintain contact by suggesting that it might provide a vehicle for reparatory work, and in this context now construes the behaviour as a mistake. As argued in the previous chapter, the label given to the behaviour is sometimes dependent upon the argument the social worker is trying to make at the time. In this instance Scott had previously been clear that the behaviour was abusive and that the boy was the kind of child capable of abuse. Now, in the context of discussing the maintenance of the sibling relationship, Scott construes the behaviour as a mistake. Putting this quote in the context of earlier comments, it would seem that for Scott, children may sometimes be abusers and their behaviour may be abusive, but sibling relationships may not.

The above extract also demonstrates that it is not the case that the participants believed that the sibling sexual behaviour had no emotional impact upon the children, but without there being clear and immediate evidence of the impact, it could be over-looked in the decision making. The social workers’ focus on physical and sexual safety seemed to preclude a consideration of the potential emotional impact on the victim. Scott thought that the behaviour was very serious and had “probably” been traumatic for the younger sibling, but the impact was not obvious and had not been considered due to the focus on safety and the implicit belief in the value of maintaining the sibling relationship. Consideration was not given to the possibility that the sibling sexual behaviour was a manifestation of an already abusive relationship, or that the quality of the sibling relationship could be impaired by the sibling sexual behaviour.

Beyond an assumption that the sibling relationship has some intrinsic value, there were only two participants, Kate and Melanie, who voiced that maintaining sibling contact could be helpful to support a sense of identity and origins. This was expressed most succinctly by Kate:

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Peter: And the reason for wanting the children to have contact?

Kate: About maintaining some sort of sibling contact as well, um, and also kind of, that whole kind of attachment process as well and a bit about identity I would imagine as well and about them having a sense of do you know this is my birth family, this is my origins. (Kate)

Otherwise the participants did not articulate their understanding of the possible benefits of maintaining a sibling relationship.

Assuming the intrinsic value of the sibling relationship and neglecting a consideration of the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour was a source of particular regret for Fiona, who witnessed the distress of both boys during supervised contact:

Well I certainly was very kind of mindful of trying to maybe minimise the kind of, not let the boys lose each other, therefore I think we emphasise-, maybe too much emphasis looking back on maintaining contact between the brothers than maybe, er, we should’ve...Gordon became quite disorganised his behaviours as well, within five minutes he was running about, climbing the walls and, you know, it just clearly wasn’t working, it wasn’t manageable for him, um, and I think afterwards what we see with Phil is it wasn’t great behaviours in the days afterwards as well, you know...He wasn’t able to manage the feelings that it brought forward for him and he would become really distressed after it and really angry and all over the place.

Now I’m of kind of I would feel, why expose these boys to this trauma all because they’re brothers? And, you know, think more about the impact on both these boys coming in to the same visual contact, and what that would trigger. How can that be, at this stage, meaningful, or healthy. (Fiona, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Fiona was concerned about the immediate physical and sexual safety of the younger brother in her decision making around whether to remove the older brother from the family home, keeping both brothers together after the first incident but removing the

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older brother after a second incident. The emotional impact of the behaviour did not appear to have been considered in making these decisions, which was a source of regret for Fiona particularly in relation to the decision to support contact between the brothers. Once again it did not appear to have been considered that the sexual behaviour might have damaged the relationship, that it might have been an abuse of that relationship, or be representative of an already abusive relationship.

This is not to say that had the social workers considered the emotional impact of the behaviour they would all have stopped contact or concluded that the relationship was abusive. Several participants thought that the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour had not in itself been significant, or that the impact of separating the siblings was worse, or would have been worse, than the impact of the sexual behaviour. In the cases discussed by George, Liz and Laura, the participants did not express that the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour had been considered as part of their decision making, but when asked about the impact commented that they did not think that the impact had been significant and would have recommended that contact be maintained.

Liz disagreed with a decision not to allow any supervised contact between the siblings, placing responsibility for the decisions with senior managers and a specialist service brought in to advise on the management of the case. Liz said that she did not know why these other involved professionals had made this decision, but it may be significant that the only occasions when supervised contact was stopped immediately following the sibling sexual behaviour was in cases where the siblings had not been living together at the time. Liz believed, the sexual behaviour aside, that the siblings had a good relationship. As long as the contact could be supervised to prevent any recurrence of the sexual behaviour, Liz believed the contact should have been allowed to continue:

I think I struggled with her not having contact, because I knew the family so well as well. So I think personally I struggled with, because they missed her. Because actually they did have a good relationship. And they did miss her. So,

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for contact to be stopped altogether, I struggled with that.  
(Liz, discussing a case involving the sexual behaviours of a  
14 year-old girl towards sisters aged 12 and eight, and a  
brother aged six)

Liz took the view that as long as contact could be made safe then the sibling relationship should be maintained. Liz did not think that the behaviour had had a detrimental impact on the younger siblings or their ongoing relationship with their older sister, and believed that the separation of the siblings was itself hurtful. Liz suggests here that knowing the family well made it difficult to see the family members being separated. The value of the sibling relationship was apparent to her. A decision to separate the siblings was perhaps less difficult to take for those professionals who did not have this level of relationship with the children and who were not acquainted with the children as siblings.

Laura and George both disagreed with the parents’ decisions to prohibit contact between the siblings, again believing that the relationship between the siblings was important and that their separation would be damaging. George believed that the lack of contact was detrimental to both the older brother and the younger sister:

I would go out regularly and say look, have you changed  
your mind yet because he needs to, he needs to have contact  
with his family.

But I think, you know, in terms of her development, here is  
somebody who’s disappeared out her life, I could imagine  
that an element of confusion about, you know, he was,  
where’s my big brother gone and, you know. (George,  
discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his seven  
year-old sister)

Laura stated the view that the lack of contact might be more damaging than the impact of the sexual behaviour:

“I know that [Worker from specialist service for children who  
have been sexually abused] was trying to explain, or trying  
to, trying to give him some sort of understanding of where his  
brother had gone but I, I don’t think that it, it’s difficult  
because I don’t know what he understood, em, and what he

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didn’t but, I think he was probably pretty confused...Em, rather than kind of, in a sort of victim of abuse kind of way, em, more in just the sort of, his brother’s abandoned him and no contact, nothing. That’s probably more confusing and more hurtful than, than the event itself, I think. (Laura, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his 12 year-old brother)

Both of these participants took the view that had the parents allowed it, it would have been preferable if the older brothers could have remained in contact with their younger siblings and that the parents could have made this situation safe in terms of any repeat of the sibling sexual behaviours.

As a final example, while Barbara believed that the sibling sexual behaviour may have had some impact on the children, she thought that other issues in the children’s lives were more salient:

But I mean maybe, you know, I’m missing it, but I would really think, I think when I’m up, you know, and you’re up and there’s discussions or you discuss with them individually, it will always go back to the domestic violence. (Barbara, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old girl and her eight and six year-old brothers)

Barbara’s experience of the children was that they were more noticeably troubled by and keen to talk about witnessing domestic violence than the sibling sexual behaviour. Barbara did not consider the sibling sexual behaviour to be the main issue affecting these children. If it is true that sexual abuse is generally assumed to be extremely harmful, this assumption is not always made of sibling sexual behaviour. Liz, George and Laura all thought that stopping sibling contact was harmful to the children, possibly more harmful than the sibling sexual behaviour. Barbara’s experience similarly was that the children’s witnessing domestic violence was more salient for them.

For most of the participants, focusing on immediate safety precluded a consideration of the emotional impact of the behaviour in their decision making. From the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, the



behaviour was regarded in isolation of the sibling relationship, the quality of the sibling relationship being neither cause nor casualty of the sibling sexual behaviour. As long as the behaviour could be stopped, then the siblings were better together.

There were only five social workers who said that they considered the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour in their decision making, but this did not necessarily lead to the siblings being separated.

### **6.3.2 Considering the possible emotional impact**

Mary, an experienced youth justice worker, believed that the sexual behaviour was likely to have a significant impact in the longer-term, but did not think that the younger sister was at present frightened of the older brother. Believing that the parents were able to manage the immediate safety of the situation, and that the emotional impact could be addressed in time, Mary supported a decision made previously by a children and families social worker that the older brother could remain at home.

Melanie, on the other hand, provided a vivid account of the immediate impact of an older brother’s behaviour on his younger sister:

They were full-time carers so they felt they could supervise it well, um, but I suppose worried about the impact on her emotionally of him being around when potentially this had happened but also, the way she’d responded to his angry outburst and, you know, she’d just, they couldn’t settle her and she was up, you know, almost all night and was really upset by it. (Melanie, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy and his two year-old sister)

Melanie went on to say:

There was a period where she became quite traumatised by her brother’s presence I suppose. (Melanie)

Melanie, a children and families social worker with more experience than most of working with cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, was aware of and concerned by the emotional impact on the younger sister of the older brother’s

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behaviours and therefore of being in his company. The older brother moved to a different placement in part because of the increasing sense that his behaviour was becoming unmanageable, but this did not prevent Melanie from considering that contact would still be in the children’s interests:

There were, a couple of contacts, after he’d moved where, after she’d seen him she was, you know maybe not really distraught but maybe not as settled in her routine, whereas now, that’s settled back and she’s actually looking forward to, to seeing him, but is looking for reassurance that, there’ll be people round about them and that they won’t be on their own. (Melanie)

The younger sister had shown some initial distress and need for reassurance, but Melanie considered the relationship valuable enough to persevere with face-to-face contact as a way of maintaining the relationship. Melanie had described the siblings as showing some care and concern for each other, of having “a really strong, bond”. She suggested that having always lived together it would be difficult for them suddenly not to have any contact. Melanie resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse and was concerned not to label the older brother as an abuser. For Melanie, the repeated and distressing physical and sexual behaviours did not define the relationship as abusive. Melanie expressed the view that contact should not be stopped automatically between siblings “the minute there appears to be some kind of sexualised behaviour between siblings”, rather:

There needs to be a proper assessment of that about what’s appropriate, appropriate risk assessment but also um, an assessment about how beneficial the contact is to the children and if there’s benefits how it can be managed. (Melanie)

From the participants’ accounts, the kinds of assessments that Melanie talks about appear rarely to have been carried out, or otherwise to have been influential in the decision making. For most of the participants there appears to have been an assumption rather than an assessment of the value of the sibling relationship. Melanie provides a counter-example. For Melanie, her assessment of the value of the sibling

relationship warranted face-to-face contact taking place between the siblings despite the distress it aroused.

Jenny, an experienced youth justice worker, also provides a counter-example. Jenny decided that contact between siblings needed to be stopped immediately as a result of the sibling sexual behaviour on the basis of a consideration both of the risk of recurrence and the potential emotional impact of the behaviour on the younger sister. Supervised contact was not therefore considered appropriate. Prior to making a more thorough assessment of the situation and expressing a lack of experience to know what the likely impact would be, Jenny thought that contact might be upsetting for the younger sister and that it would be prudent not to allow it. Jenny went so far as to suggest that the girl not be allowed to visit the place where the sexual behaviour had taken place:

I think that she would, I mean she was just little, I think that she would be frightened or that it would make her think about what had happened and it would upset her, um, and I think as well, going to that kind of not being a client group that I’ve really worked with, I guess I didn’t really know what the impact might be, and so it seemed more sensible to just not put her in that position at all, than to run the risk, that there might be an impact. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny also thought that the older brother might be angry with the sister for having disclosed the behaviour:

I think the worry would be you’d take him home angry and then he confronts the source of, do you know, what’s made him have to sit in these sessions and do all this talking and what are the repercussions of that. (Jenny)

Again for this reason Jenny thought it better to stop contact in the first instance, pending a more thorough assessment. Unlike Melanie, Jenny had not had any prior involvement with the family to have been able to assess the sibling relationship with regard to its possible strengths, and was not at that time acquainted with the children as siblings. Also in contrast to the case discussed by Melanie, the children in Jenny’s

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case did not live together and had not grown up living together. This was not stated as a reason for stopping the contact, but it is possible that Jenny did not make an assumption about the intrinsic value of the sibling relationship as a result. Similarly, Brian supported a parental decision to stop all contact between the siblings, ostensibly for reasons of safety, but also in a situation where the siblings had not grown up together and had been living together for at most two years when the abuse was disclosed. By contrast, Liz, George and Laura protested against decisions to stop contact in situations where the siblings had grown up together. The sibling relationship perspective may be stronger in situations where the siblings live and have grown up together.

In addition to Mary, Melanie and Jenny, Lisa, a newly qualified children and families social worker, also expressed concern about the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour, this time in having a bearing on the decision to remove an older brother from the house and of stopping contact thereafter. Lisa had not been the social worker when this decision was made, but her account of the rationale for the decision suggests that either she or the social worker at the time considered the emotional impact as being significant both for the victim and the other children in the house:

I think to my, (sighs) I might not be 100% right, but I think part of it was mum's decision. Um, I think they felt that, you know, the potential risk, um, and the emotional risk that it placed the other children at, particularly Dan having him remain in the house.

It's a pretty graphic kind of incident, you know, the emotional damage that that would have done to a little boy of 10 years old as well. (Lisa, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old brother)

The older brother was removed from the house, but it should be noted that whilst this decision was supported by the social worker, it was made by the mother. The social worker apparently agreed with the decision not to allow contact of any sort, but again this decision was made by a Sheriff. A consideration of the emotional impact of the

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sexual behaviour did not preclude the boys from having contact at a later stage when they both requested it.

In the previous chapter Karen spoke about the sexual abuse in the case she discussed being only one way the older brother may have exerted power over his younger brother. Similarly, while Lisa supported the brothers’ later wish to have contact with each other, she believed there was potential for the sibling relationship to retain abusive elements even if the immediate physical safety could be ensured by the contact being supervised. For that reason she planned to involve a specialist service to help manage the contact:

That's probably partly due to my own experience of um, potential triggers, and under sort of maybe kind of more kind of underhand messages that are being, so just to have somebody who's a bit more experienced in that um, [Specialist service for children who have been sexually abused] had said that they would be happy to do that with me, just in case there was more subliminal sort of messages or things that they were able to pick up through their working relationship with Dan. (Lisa)

Lisa indicates the possibility of the relationship as well as the behaviour being abusive, with the potential for ‘underhand messages’ being communicated and painful memories being triggered. Nonetheless, in this case and the cases discussed by Jenny and Karen, the social workers were open to sibling contact being reintroduced at a later stage. Even where siblings are separated and contact stopped, this is not seen as a long-term solution. I will say more about this shortly.

Focussing on safety in terms of immediate physical and sexual safety precluded a consideration of the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour, supporting the behaviour being seen in isolation from the sibling relationship. In most cases, if the situation could be made safe in terms of stopping further incidents of sexual behaviour, the siblings could remain living together or otherwise maintain their relationship through supervised face-to-face contact. The perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value appears stronger where the

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siblings live and have grown up together, and where the social worker is acquainted with the children as siblings.

Several social workers suggested that had they considered the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour in their decision making this would not have led to the siblings being separated. Sometimes the impact of the behaviour was considered insignificant, less harmful than other issues in the children’s lives, or less harmful than would be caused to the siblings by separating them. It is not assumed that sexual behaviour between siblings is extremely harmful.

Five of the 21 participants reported considering the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour in their decision making, three of whom were either youth justice or more experienced social workers. If it was believed that the impact was significant but would not be manifest until sometime in the future, or if the sibling relationship was believed to have underlying strengths, then the sibling sexual behaviour would not alter the social workers’ view that the siblings should remain together. The social workers only seemed to support a decision to stop any contact between the siblings immediately following the sibling sexual behaviour where it was considered that the behaviour could have a potentially significant emotional impact, and where the siblings had either not grown up together or where their relationship was regarded as abusive. Repeated physical and sexual behaviours which caused obvious and immediate distress did not define the relationship as abusive or contraindicate contact between the siblings. Both of the examples given where the relationship was regarded as abusive shared the following features: The social workers were allocated only to the victim; there was a five year age-gap between the siblings; the sibling sexual behaviour involved rape; and the perpetrator expressed no remorse. The criteria for establishing a sibling relationship as abusive are apparently strict, and did not preclude contact being reintroduced at a later stage without any apparent change in sibling relationship dynamics. Sibling relationships are non-abusive and of intrinsic value, and may be perceived to have value even when they are abusive.

In keeping with a focus on immediate safety, when siblings remained living together or in direct contact, all of the social workers introduced rules for the families or children to follow in order to try to keep the children safe. Indeed, many of the social workers referred to this as a ‘safety plan’.

### **6.3.3 Making rules**

#### **6.3.3.1 Making rules around immediate safety**

Among the rules that the social workers introduced, almost all of them advised parents not to allow the siblings to be left on their own together, or made sure that any contact was supervised by social work department staff. Angela, Scott and James provide three of many examples:

They agreed that he could see the, you know, see his half-siblings when under supervision, and he was fine with that, so that has, it has come about. It was kind of just a voluntary agreement really that it would be supervised. From my perspective if that wasn’t in place I think I would be quite concerned as to the safety of the children. (Angela, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

So there would be clarity about that the boys needed to be watched at all times. (Scott, discussing a case involving a 13 year-old boy and his six year-old brother)

But then when he did go to the, into the house then it was about him not being allowed to go upstairs on his own. Him not being allowed to go into any of the other rooms on his own or the kids’ rooms on his own. And, you know, and her keeping a track of exactly where he is, erm, when the kids come in the house. (James, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours by a 15 year-old boy towards his sister (aged one) and brother (aged three))

In these three examples the rules concerned sibling contact, and the need to ensure that the children were never left unsupervised in order to prevent any further sexual behaviour taking place. In the following examples the situations concerned siblings continuing to live together:

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But, you know, she was advised, we put in kind of place giving her advice about, you know, Roger and Liam shouldn’t ever be left alone together in the house. Um, you know, she should be monitoring it if they were in the same room together. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

But also they had to be supervised at all times. She couldn’t go out to the shops and leave the two of them. If she was going out to the shops, she took Duncan with her. That’s what usually happened. (Gordon, discussing a case involving a brother and sister aged 12)

So, they’re never on their own together, um, and the safety plan involves, if Mum has to be at work her partner will babysit, or one of two friends that are named and have been police-checked and local authority-checked etcetera. (Annette, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

These quotes begin to illustrate the challenges the parents could face when the siblings remained living at home in making sure that the children were never left on their own together.

As a corollary to the rule of not allowing children to be on their own together, many of the participants commented on rules about the children sharing a bedroom, and changes sometimes being necessary to the configuration of the household to ensure that the children could sleep in separate rooms:

They could-, they weren’t in the same room, they didn’t sleep in the same room. I actually think, it was quite bizarre because Phil was to be in, it’s a two-bedroomed house, and I think initially the boys shared the room and mum had a room so she had gone to sleep in the living room, Phil was to be in the back, mum and Gordon at the front of the house so she could watch him, in her words. (Ruth, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

The mum had then agreed, I think they helped her get a bed-settee and she would sleep in the living room eh, so that any, eh, home visits at the time because Duncan did come home occasionally at the weekends, they could have their own bedroom and while that isn’t something that stops the



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behaviour it was felt back at that time eh, it was a way of managing. (Gordon, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours between a brother and sister aged 12)

As Gordon suggests, sleeping in separate bedrooms might not prevent any sexual behaviour from taking place, and for some social workers the children sleeping in separate rooms was not considered safe enough, the carers or parents not being able to monitor the children’s movements during the night. For that reason:

There was work-, erm, alarms put on the bedroom doors. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

One of the decisions, one of the, the things that the foster carers did at that point was, um, put a bell, in Michelle’s room? (Penny, discussing a case involving sisters aged seven, six and three, and a brother aged one)

Melanie and Annette also spoke about alarms and locks on doors being used to prevent the siblings from entering each other’s bedrooms. In addition to these physical measures, four of the participants said that they had introduced rules around the children maintaining standards of dress and not being in situations where the siblings would see each other undressed:

The contact was taking place in a space where it wasn't going swimming. So they weren't in an environment where there was fewer clothes on. They weren't, erm, in environments where they could go missing. So it was very tight. Quite restricted contact. (Scott, discussing a case involving a 13 year-old boy and his six year-old brother)

But there was a lot of, er, making sure they were not in the same rooms, toilets, when is their bathroom times? Separate bathroom times. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

They shouldn't be, like just walking about in pants in the house. Um, it was have your pyjamas on, have a top on. (Emma, discussing a case involving eight and nine year-old boys and their six and five year-old brothers)

It was not always clear what the purpose of rules around clothing was, but the implication was that it would reduce the possibility of sexual arousal between the siblings, of the victim being perceived as vulnerable, and provide at least some protection against inappropriate touching.

Annette captured the lengths that social workers regarded as being required, and were prepared to ask families to go to, in order for siblings to remain together:

He sleeps in the lounge, um, that was another part of the safety plan is, he had a bedroom upstairs that he shared with his younger brother, but because both the bedrooms were on the same level, he, he now sleeps downstairs, um, she's got a lock on her room door now, um, they've talked about, you know rules around undressing in the house, but they're all pretty modest anyway, you know, it's not like they walked about naked, and, um, you know so she's got her own room, she's got her lock on her door, she's got her safe place, she's got a shower upstairs, so, you know she can go in and out of her room without having to worry about things like that, and then the family group conferencing safety plan was the addition of, you know, adding the neighbours and the partner to do, to make sure the children weren't on their own, by themselves at any point. (Annette, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

These extracts illustrate the concerns the social workers had about the risks of recurrence of sibling sexual behaviour, the focus on immediate physical and sexual safety, and the belief that if safety could be managed, no matter how extensive the measures, then the siblings were better together.

### **6.3.3.2 Making rules around sibling relationships**

In making rules in order for siblings to remain living together or having contact, only a small minority of the participants said that they had introduced any rules about how the siblings should relate to each other when in each other's company. Even fewer said that they had undertaken any joint work with the siblings to repair any harm caused to the relationship by the sibling sexual behaviour. Apart from making sure that there was no recurrence of the sibling sexual behaviour, most of the participants

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did not express any need to intervene in how the siblings related to each other. Ruth spoke for most of the participants:

I think the, you know, contact like I say wasn’t for extended periods of time anyway, so I think they did meet in a room and it was just having something to eat and a drink, um, so there was nothing more structured in it at that point anyway. (Ruth, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Whatever the relationship was like it seemed generally to be regarded by the social workers as good enough as it was. Maintaining a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, there was no need to consider the quality of the sibling relationship, the impact on the relationship of the sibling sexual behaviour, or ways in which the siblings related, which may have provided a context for the sibling sexual behaviour taking place.

Scott and Kate did introduce some rules about how the siblings related to each other, but this was about managing safety rather than a concern with the sibling relationship dynamics. Scott did not want there to be rough play between the siblings because of the younger brother’s health condition, and Kate tried to enforce a rule during contact that the siblings not be allowed to whisper to each other, being concerned about indirect contact with the children’s mother. Apart from that, however:

No, there’s been no kind of joint, joined up working should I say, in terms of their family background as well, and I suppose that’s maybe the di-, with hindsight it’s probably one of the gaps that’s that there wasn’t anything done in terms of therapeutic work with the three children, um, about that and I s-, in a group session almost if you like. (Kate, discussing a case involving sexual behaviour between a seven year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

Kate reflected that not only had there been no therapeutic work undertaken with the siblings regarding the abuse by their parents, no work had been done with the siblings, either individually or jointly, to explore the sibling relationship or any impact of the sibling sexual behaviour.

On the other hand, while she did not consider either the sexual behaviour or the sibling relationships to have been abusive, through supervising contact Penny had observed significant difficulties in the dynamics of the relationships between the children, with intense rivalry, jealousy, and re-triggering of trauma experiences from their earlier childhood with their parents. Penny introduced rules in order to prevent any ill-feelings from escalating between the siblings and from being addressed inappropriately:

We had put up, you know, there are ground rules to contact, these are the things that you can't do, or say, or you know if you have a problem with somebody you need to discuss it, with one of the workers. It's there and then, we sort it out instead of shouting your feelings over. (Penny, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours between a seven year-old girl and her sisters aged six and three, and brother aged one)

Penny later referred some of the children to specialist counselling services in order to work through some of the difficult feelings the siblings had in relation to each other and to assess whether continuing contact was helpful for them. I will return to the outcome of these discussions later in this chapter.

While few of the social workers introduced rules around how the siblings should relate, even fewer undertook any work with the siblings in order to ameliorate their relationship. For Jenny this was because she had assessed it as unnecessary. As noted earlier, Jenny was unusual among the participants in reporting having undertaken an assessment of the quality of the sibling relationship. When Jenny re-introduced contact between the siblings she did not say that she had introduced any rules around how the siblings should relate to each other, but prior to the re-introduction had carried out some work with the older brother in order to explore his feelings towards his sister:

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I mean we looked at things in kind of intervention around sibling rivalry and what his views were of his sister, and do you know things about how they’d been treated and all his kind of feelings towards her and all those kind of things to kind of see perhaps where it might have come from. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny concluded from this work that the quality of the sibling relationship had not contributed to the sexual behaviour taking place. Jenny assessed that the sexual behaviour had not had a significantly detrimental impact on the sibling relationship and did not consider that any joint sibling work was necessary.

There were only three social workers who discussed any work being undertaken with the siblings together in order to discuss the sibling sexual behaviour and to work to improve the quality of the sibling relationship. They did not include two of the social workers, Lisa and Karen, who had judged the sibling sexual behaviour and the wider relationship as abusive. I should also note that James, a youth justice social worker, had considered in one of the cases he discussed that maintaining contact between the siblings might have provided a vehicle for “reparation, resolution” (James), and he was disappointed for that reason that two younger siblings did not want to have contact with their older brother.

Having had the experience of the siblings finding contact very difficult to manage, Ruth said that she then recognised that the sexual behaviour had had an impact on the sibling relationship and that the relationship needed some repair. The younger brother needed the impact of the sexual behaviour to be acknowledged by the older brother:

Gordon needed to know that Phil accepted that what he had done was wrong and, you know, to kind of manage his anxiety about seeing him again and whatever so we had decided that Phil, and this was a decision with social work, [specialist service for children with harmful sexual

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behaviour] and CAMHS<sup>3</sup>, that Phil would, if he could, and he wanted to, was to write a letter of apology to Gordon. (Ruth, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

In discussing the joint work that was undertaken with the siblings in the case she discussed, Mary commented:

I don't think it was a massive intensive piece though. I don't think it was, but it just added on to the work that she'd done with, with the young girl. But it was openly acknowledged in the family. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

Like Jenny, Mary was a youth justice social worker, who had undertaken significant work with the older brother, and separate work had also been undertaken with the younger sister. It did not seem necessary for extensive work to be undertaken with the siblings jointly. Mary made the following comment in relation to the work with the older brother:

I did quite specific stuff on what should you be as an older brother, because and that was just because at that point the parents were kind of struggling with, with the young girl. So and part of that was in relation to this young guy who was going in and winding her up and poking her. And just winding her up. She was going off the rails. You know, nothing sexual at all. It was just a normal, but for his age that is not the kind of normal brother-sister relationship. (Mary)

Mary remarks that the older brother's behaviour could have been considered normal were it not for his age. What Mary does not say is if she considered whether this would be acceptable behaviour in the context of the sibling sexual abuse. It raises the question as to whether 'normal' sibling relationships remain acceptable following sibling sexual abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

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Finally, as well as undertaking individual work with the children, Barbara, this time a children and families social worker, undertook some work with the family as a whole, talking openly about the sexual behaviours that had taken place and how the family needed to work together to ensure that they did not recur:

And it was very open anyway, because it was a family um, issue that had went on. It was, how do we resolve this? You know, um, there wasn't any hidden agendas that, you know, that can then plant things and make things worse which I think happened in the first case. But um, normally when I came back to go back over that, everybody knew, you know, what had happened. Everybody knew, you know, the reason why we were meeting up. Everybody knew that, you know, that we were hoping for the outcome of it. (Barbara, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old girl and her eight and six year-old brothers)

Barbara worked with the mother and children to develop some rules for the household, and as well as these rules including measures designed to keep the children safe, they also involved rules around how the children would relate to each other and how the household should run:

Aye, there was no bullying. There was no swearing. There was like no pulling of hair. I mean there was no fighting and no pulling of hair. So it's obviously things that have maybe just happened of late to it. Um, put dishes away and things like that. Um, but we had, you know before that, sometime we had done charts anyway about the um, with mum was saying they weren't doing things, you know, in the house and all that. So they had, such and such was to do hoovering, such and such, so, they had the chart about the chores and who was to do what on what nights, so. (Barbara)

Barbara embedded the rules around sexual safety within the context of the sibling relationships and family functioning more widely.

Maintaining a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, the social workers focused on safety in terms of immediate physical and sexual safety, precluding a consideration in their decision making of the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour and regarding the behaviour in isolation of the

sibling relationship. The sibling sexual behaviour was generally not considered to have its roots in, or consequences for, the quality of the sibling relationship. The sibling relationship was assumed to have intrinsic value, and as long as the behaviour could be stopped, there would be no reason to intervene in the relationship further.

The safety rules sometimes had far-reaching consequences for the physical configuration of the household, the household routines, and the degree of freedom and independence those within the household could enjoy. Social workers expected families to go to great lengths to keep siblings together. It was rare, however, for the social workers to introduce rules to ameliorate the sibling relationships, or to consider that any joint work might need to be undertaken with the siblings either to address dynamics which supported the sibling sexual behaviour taking place or to repair any damage to the relationship caused by the sexual behaviour. Very few of the social workers discussed undertaking an assessment of the quality of the sibling relationship. It was assumed to be of intrinsic value. There were some notable exceptions, and while there was no clear-cut pattern, experienced social workers, particularly those in youth justice, seemed more likely to discuss assessments of this sort.

## **6.4 Anticipating others’ decisions**

There were occasions that the social workers decided that the siblings needed to be separated, principally for reasons of safety and only rarely with the additional concern about the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour. Excepting the two social workers who considered the sibling relationship to be abusive, where the siblings were separated the social workers expressed the view that it would be desirable to work towards the siblings being reunited. Separation was not a long-term solution.

Several participants remarked that it was inevitable that family members would want contact with each other, no matter what the history between them:



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But I think they, they agreed that, you know, they are family members and there's only so long that you can go without introducing them back together. (Angela, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

No matter how long, how mu-, how bad things get for kids they still want contact with their family, no matter what they've done. (Liz)

With that in mind, some of the participants reflected that it would be better to facilitate this reunion while they remained involved in the case than to continue to prevent contact only for families to reunify once the case was closed. If the social workers believed that siblings would reunify anyway, they might anticipate this and make a decision to bring this about during their involvement:

I think in hindsight I'm not sure that you always think about these things at the time, but you're always aware that there'll come a point where you'll close the case, and when you close the case these families will do whatever they want to do and they've got nobody telling them, and so I think it's much better, certainly from my point of view, if there's something that you think they're going to do, is to get them to do it whilst you're still involved, and make sure it's managed and that they do it well, than to just to say no, no, no and then you close the case and say cheerio and you've got no idea what they're doing. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny wanted to make sure that she was still available to support the family if there were any difficulties once contact was re-established. Liz took a similar position:

But I can remember the argument being that she's, she's going to be 16 soon. And we need to try and move it on so that it's done in a planned way rather than she just moves out of [residential school] and moves back in the house. And we've no control over it. (Liz, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old girl's sexual behaviours towards her 12 and eight year-old sisters and six year-old brother)

Echoing the extract from the interview with Angela above, for Liz there was no particular event or assessment which prompted the decision to reintroduce contact between the siblings:

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And I can't remember the point that we went, alright, well we'll just have to start it now. And that's the way it felt, I think. I think it, there just became a time where we thought, right time's getting on now. It's been a year-and-a-half. Let's move it on. I don't think there was any particular incident or something happened or work done...so I suppose, in essence, I do thin-, probably the decision was made because of a lapse of time rather than, I don't know if there was any particular change in risk. (Liz)

For Liz, the siblings would at some stage reunite anyway, and at an indeterminate point it simply felt that they had been separated for long enough. Like Jenny, Liz wanted to be available to the family in case any difficulties arose when the older sister returned home, and to have a role to be able to intervene if necessary.

Kate expressed a sense almost of powerlessness in the face of the birth family. In anticipation of the younger sister's desire to return to live with her mother, Kate wanted sibling contact to take place as a protective factor, amongst other things to demystify the family, to reduce some of its allure, and to try to reduce the desire to return to live with the mother:

And I suppose that's the power of, of the kind of birth family as well in terms of, um, the pull, that they, and I think research tells us that a lot of children do go back but I think as a department our view was, and our intention was, if we're open and transparent about it and we arrange this and we facilitate it in a safe way, that that should hopefully keep her safe.

It was good planning, if that's what you kind of, probably what I'm trying to say, it was, that it was kind of thought out in terms of her identity, attachment, um, you know in terms of having an understanding of her background and, and, taking away the kind of the myths, if you like, around what do my family look like if I don't see them, because she has this idealised view of her Mum, and I think if we hadn't have done that the siblings would have also been there as well, almost, um, and she has a real idealised notion of her birth Mum at this moment in time, despite having an

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understanding of some of the issues that have gone on in the background as well, um, so, and I think again, it’s just, you know, as we know that children do return home as well, so it’s about trying to kind of, protect them in some senses.  
(Kate)

For Kate it seemed inevitable that the children would want contact with each other and with their mother. The hope was that by supervising sibling contact, as well as meeting the child’s identity needs, it would keep the sibling contact itself safe and would reduce the younger sister’s desire to see the siblings in an unsupervised way, which could risk coming into contact with the birth mother. With the perceived inevitability of reunion, contact between siblings, but not with mothers, would be supported.

Melanie and Mary were more proactive in encouraging sibling contact, expressing the view that maintaining contact or facilitating a reunion between siblings as children would not only anticipate their future decisions to see each other as adults, but would afford the opportunity for reparation that might be more difficult to achieve once the siblings were older:

But the reality is that they’ll grow, and they’ll, you know, they’ve got identity needs, they’ve got all sorts of needs that relate to being part of a family, and they won’t go away and what happens in ten years’ time when social workers aren’t around them to protect them and their relationships.  
(Melanie, discussing a case involving a 10 year-old boy and his two year-old sister)

That was one of the things that I brought up at the child protection case conference these two kids are going to be adults one day. Er, and that was a worry for me. I’m always kind of pre-empting, because then people will then look at you and I think, no, what we do here and now makes a difference for these adults, these two kids as adults.

But, erm, that was my view at the case conference that they’re going to be adults one day. They’re going to come back together. If we don’t help them deal with it now. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

James also took the view that reparation between the siblings was best undertaken while the siblings were children and would be more difficult to achieve as adults.

The participants did not think that separating siblings was a long-term solution to the sibling sexual behaviour, and it might be better to anticipate siblings reuniting by facilitating a reunion while the social worker was still available to support the family with any difficulties that may arise. There was also the view expressed that dealing with the issues as children might pre-empt the kinds of problems that would be harder for the siblings to face as adults. As well as promoting sibling contact for its own sake, one social worker also expressed the view that facilitating sibling contact might help to prevent a reunion with an abusive mother. It is not always desirable for children to have contact with their parent. Siblings, however, are better together, and if they cannot be together for a period of time, they will be better together again in the future, and sooner rather than later.

## **6.5 Coming under pressure from other professionals**

From the participants’ reflections on their dealings with other agencies and professionals it seems that the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value may be more widely shared. When the social workers did make decisions to separate siblings immediately as a result of the sibling sexual behaviour it was primarily for reasons of safety, and the participants did not comment on these decisions being met with any resistance from others outside of the family. However, in the longer-term it seemed that siblings should not be kept apart, and when social workers attempted to make decisions to stop contact between siblings other than for their immediate safety, they reported being met with considerable opposition.

Melanie reflected on her experiences of some cases other than those involving sexual behaviour between siblings, saying that removing siblings from abusive situations at home could be prevented by Children’s Hearings if the panel believed that the siblings could not subsequently be placed together:

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This decision making was entrenched in the children’s hearing, um, decisions, and you know they made decisions that contradicted our recommendations and that all has an impact, and they’re talking about, you know, the importance of sibling contact as well, and the importance of, you know, if you can’t place children together sometimes, that, if you go to them with a plan that we want to accommodate these children, we’ve got placements and they’re not together, sometimes that can prevent that accommodation from happening. (Melanie)

Melanie said that anticipating this response from Children’s Hearings panels might influence their decision making such that children would not be removed from parents considered abusive. She went on to say that considerable evidence would be required in order to be able to justify a decision to stop sibling contact:

They’ll impose contact unless we’re saying, and usually have to have the backing of psychologists to say, no this child is really traumatised by this, or this needs to be managed in a different way from what you are suggesting is right.  
(Melanie)

Melanie suggests that it would not acceptable to stop contact between siblings on the basis that it might be traumatic for them. The social worker would have to provide evidence that the siblings had indeed been traumatised by the contact, and their evidence alone might not be sufficient. Melanie believed that their position would need to be supported by psychologists.

Penny provided the only example of attempting to stop contact between siblings in a case involving sibling sexual behaviour for reasons other than the siblings’ immediate safety. Penny had been supervising contact between the siblings for some time, and while this kept the contact safe in terms of any recurrence of sexual behaviour, Penny’s experience was that the contact was very upsetting and disruptive for some of the siblings. Penny formed the opinion that the contact might need to be stopped, even if temporarily. She expressed a view similar to Melanie’s, that any decision to stop contact would need to be supported by a psychologist’s assessment. However, rather than this being about the psychologist having greater expertise,

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Penny suggested that it was because they would be seen as independent. Penny did not think that her own assessment of the situation was seen as independent by the other people involved in the decision making process:

Well, 'cause we've already accommodated the children, we've already made decisions around about why they shouldn't be with their parents. It's, it's kind of difficult then to go in and make an argument, I suppose it comes back to, I don't know if it's still that old, you know, child catcher. (Penny, discussing a case involving brothers and sisters who had engaged in sexual behaviour with each other when aged seven, six, three and one)

Penny's sense of a lack of trust in her independence seemed to be about the social work role itself. Having already been involved in making decisions to interfere with the family's private life, she considered that she was no longer regarded as being able to form an objective and independent assessment. Further than that, with the sense of enormity of stopping contact between siblings, Penny seemed to have internalised a doubt about her own independence and wanted an assessment to be undertaken by an agency, which had had no prior involvement with the family, in order to provide evidence as to whether or not the sibling contact should continue:

I feel, that if you're going to be doing something, that's as big as that, with a family, there needs to be something else, there needs to be something else that, that, that you're saying, do you know, we've done this assessment, we've felt that this was what was happening with the kids, we believed that this was detrimental to them, but in order to evidence some of that, we passed it on to this agency, who did an independent assessment and this is what they've come back with. (Penny)

This suggests that stopping contact between siblings is seen as an unusual and grave decision to make, and in this context there may be a lack of confidence among some social workers, which is reinforced by professionals and others involved in the decision making processes. When Penny finally took a position that the sibling contact needed to be stopped, defending this position at a professionals' meeting exhorted a considerable emotional toll:

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There were a whole load of people who were of a different view, and to sit there making those decisions knowing that, you, you are, you are effectively saying, this child can't see another, you know, can't see their sibling, for whatever reason, whether you know, and I, I firmly believed that it was the best decision for the children at the time. Um, but emotionally, that, that takes its toll on you...I, I literally came out and I was, I was dry, um, you know, having spent like an hour and-a-half trying to explain, why we had made all these decisions, what, what these decisions were being made...It wasn't my decision, as such, it was, it was a joint agency decision. Um, but when, when you've got somebody who consistently says it's the wrong decision, this is what they want, this is what they want to happen, this is what, it's, it's really draining. (Penny)

Whatever the rhetoric of shared multi-agency decision making, this extract suggests that the responsibility for the decisions is experienced by this social worker as ultimately resting with them. It is difficult to know how widespread some of these opinions and experiences are, but it seems that the idea of sibling relationships having intrinsic value is a perspective shared by other professionals. Making a decision to stop contact between siblings other than for reasons of immediate safety may be experienced as one of enormity, as highly problematic and emotionally draining, requiring independent evidence and the ability to withstand considerable pressure from others.

This contrasts to some extent with the decisions social workers made about contact with parents. I have limited data on this as at the time of the interviews I was more concerned with gathering data in connection with decisions made about the siblings. However, from the six cases discussed in which children were removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect by the parents, it seemed that while there was still a strong desire to keep the families together and to maintain contact with parents, there was more willingness to stop contact with parents than with siblings. There were also some indications that the social workers were less hesitant to stop contact with fathers than with mothers. Of the six cases, contact was maintained with all of the mothers initially, but was stopped in four cases when contact was found to be detrimental to the children's welfare. Fathers had some involvement with the

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children in five of the cases, with contact being initially maintained in only three of these. The social workers wanted to stop contact with fathers immediately in the other two cases. Social workers might still face strong resistance to their decisions, not least from the parents themselves, but the social workers seemed more confident of their ground.

Melanie, for example, discussed a case where she stopped a boy’s contact with his father due to concerns about sexual abuse. She expressed frustration that a Children’s Hearing “imposed contact” between them, which, according to her account, was decided on the basis that the boy said that he wanted contact with his father when he was asked by the Children’s Panel “when his dad was sitting next to him” (Melanie). Melanie then made the following comment:

The thing is he does actually have, there’s lots of elements of his relationship with his dad which are very positive. His dad’s much more reliable and straightforward and less abusive in a lot of senses than his mum is. (Melanie)

This again raises the question as to what makes a relationship abusive. Melanie had wanted contact with a father to stop on the basis of concerns about sexual abuse, presumably therefore considering that his relationship with his son would be abusive, but reflects that this was perhaps not the case with this particular father.

In a case she discussed, Kate seemed more ready to stop contact with the father than with the mother. Kate reported that the children had been extensively sexually abused by both parents. The children had given clear statements that both parents and other adults had been involved in the abuse, but for reasons that were not made clear the full extent of the mother’s role was doubted. Contact with the father was stopped immediately, but continued with the mother:

And Dad was subsequently charged, um, with lewd and libidinous and released on bail...but I think in between that time, Mum, had allowed Dad to have access to the children. (Kate)



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Despite these ongoing concerns about the mother’s behaviour, supervised contact with the mother continued for some time, and consideration was given as to whether the children could return home to live with her. Even supervised contact with the father was out of the question, however:

So, the plan was always to kind of look at well can they return home to their Mum, let’s assess her in terms of whether she’s a safe carer, should she have them.

And obviously there was always the cond-, no, no, Dad was never considered, obviously, for obvious reasons. (Kate)

It was obvious to Kate that contact should not be allowed with the father. His relationship with his children was regarded as abusive, but Kate was not initially so clear that the mother’s relationship was abusive, despite both parents having been involved in the sexual abuse of the children. During her involvement with the case Kate became increasingly clear that she did not think that contact with the mother was in the best interests of the children, but thought that it would have been difficult to persuade a Children’s Hearing of this:

Would that be in their best interests to promote some contact with her? Probably wouldn’t have thought so...but that would be difficult to get through a Hearing.

[I think it’s] difficult for panels to make decisions in terms of that, because I think they have this view of, you should have contact, but it’s not always the best, in the child’s best interests to have contact, for example clear-cut case with Dad, but there’s that kind of perception of, females are safe. (Kate)

Once again Kate expresses that it is clear to her that contact with the father should be stopped, and that this decision requires no explanation. Kate also provides a suggestion as to why the mother’s role in the abuse was doubted, in that women tend to be assumed to be safe, not to be abusers. Judging by these decisions and the rationale given, it would appear that a father’s abusive behaviour towards a child might more easily define the relationship as abusive, but a mother’s abusive behaviour would not. This relates to social workers, and other professionals, maintaining a perspective of parents, and especially mothers, as well-intentioned

protective. Social workers are reluctant to relinquish this view and require considerable evidence to do so, an issue which will be the focus of the next chapter.

The participants expressed the desire to keep families together and to maintain relationships between family members. However, there was no question of a sexually abusive father maintaining contact with his children, and attempts would be made to stop contact with mothers if it caused distress or was not regarded as in the children’s best interests, even if the children requested it. Contact with a sexually abusive sibling, however, would be encouraged, even if the contact caused distress. Of all familial relationships, social workers were most reluctant to stop contact between siblings and to see a sibling relationship as abusive. Families may be better together, but the view that siblings are better together may be even stronger.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that social workers maintain a perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value. This perspective is especially strong when the social worker is acquainted with the children as siblings and where the siblings live and have grown up together. It adds to the social workers’ difficulties in making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour.

The perspective is demonstrated through several mechanisms. The social workers look for reasons outside of the sibling relationship to explain the sibling sexual behaviour and resist labelling the behaviour as abuse. The social workers focus on immediate physical and sexual safety, precluding a consideration of emotional safety, therefore responding to the sexual behaviour in isolation of the sibling relationship. The sibling relationship is seen as neither the cause nor the casualty of the sexual behaviour, and while rules may be introduced to try to ensure the safety of the siblings, these rules rarely address the quality of the sibling relationship. Very few social workers offer support to ameliorate the quality of the sibling relationship: whatever its quality, the relationship is regarded as having intrinsic value. This perspective may help to explain why a second incident is required before the social workers consider the need to intervene to disrupt the relationship. Where concerns

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about the safety of the siblings mean that social workers decide that siblings may not be able to live together, they almost invariably support supervised face-to-face contact, and separation is not regarded as a long-term solution. Anticipating that siblings will choose to have contact with each other in the future, social workers decide to facilitate this contact during their involvement.

Sexual behaviour taking place between siblings appears to challenge the assumption that sexual abuse is always extremely harmful. When the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour was considered it was sometimes thought to be less severe than the harm that would have been caused to the siblings by their separation. Maintaining the sibling relationship appeared to be given very high importance by other professionals as well as social workers, with some limited evidence that sibling relationships may be given even higher importance than paternal if not parental relationships. Decision making takes place intuitively within the context of relationships with children and families, with some evidence of a more assessment-based approach being taken by youth justice social workers and those with more previous experience of working with cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings.



## **Chapter 7: Maintaining an underlying perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective**

### **7.1 Introduction**

I argued in the preceding chapters that the social workers’ child and sibling relationships perspectives made it difficult for the social workers to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. The social workers might doubt the sexual behaviour took place, resist labelling the behaviour as abuse, and look for reasons to explain the behaviour, which dissociate the behaviour from the sibling relationship and mitigate the child’s culpability and intention to harm. A second incident was required before the social workers would consider intervening to separate the siblings. Making a conscious and self-reflexive effort to maintain a perspective of the perpetrator as a vulnerable child with victim experiences of their own militated against any straightforward and unproblematic decision to remove them from the household or to stop contact between the siblings. Decisions then mostly centred on immediate safety, whether further sibling sexual behaviour could be prevented. It was chiefly to the parents that the social workers turned to provide that level of safety.

In this chapter I will therefore explore the third major influence on the social workers in their decision making, namely a perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective. Whilst I did not specifically ask, only one of the participants spoke about assessing a parent’s ability or capacity to protect their children. I will develop the argument that in the absence of assessing or having the opportunity to assess the parent’s ability to protect their children, and in the face of often uncertain and contradictory evidence, the social workers instead formed an intuitive judgement of the parent’s character based upon whether or not they seemed to be ‘on board’. A parent being regarded as ‘on board’ carried a sense of appearing to have a shared understanding of the problems identified by the social worker and being the kind of parent with whom the social worker felt they could work. A parent being ‘on board’

was taken as representative of two dimensions of the parent’s character: Being well-intentioned and being protective.

The participants did not always describe parents explicitly using the terms ‘well-intentioned’ and ‘protective’, but focused on a small number of the parent’s qualities and behaviours in order to form a judgement of the parent’s character, which in turn informed the social workers’ decision making. I have summarised and grouped these qualities and behaviours under the terms ‘well-intentioned’ and ‘protective’. These two dimensions of a parent’s character, whilst not synonymous, are overlapping and highly interrelated. I will therefore sometimes refer to parents as ‘well-intentioned protective’.

Being ‘well-intentioned’ meant the parent appeared loving and caring towards their children, to want the best for their children. The parent might not always be able to care effectively for their children and might make mistakes which could harm them, but this was not for want of good intentions. If the parent was someone with whom the social worker felt they could work, it would be inferred that the parent was well-intentioned in their relationship with their children. Equally, if the parent appeared well-intentioned in their relationship with their children, the social worker could conclude that the parent was someone with whom they could work.

Being ‘protective’ meant the parent seemed to have the intention to try to protect their children. The parent may not always manage to do so, but they could be seen as protective if they appeared to want to try to do so. If the parent appeared to have a shared understanding of the problem in their relationship with the social worker, it would be inferred that they were protective in their relationship with their children.

Taken together, if a parent was regarded as having a shared understanding of the problem and was someone with whom the social worker felt they could work, they could be considered ‘on board’ in their relationship with the social worker, and therefore ‘well-intentioned protective’ in their relationship with their children.

The judgement of the parent’s character as ‘well-intentioned protective’ was based upon the social worker’s relationship with the parent and sometimes the information in case files. If a parent was regarded as ‘on board’ it was very likely that the social worker would support the parent’s decisions, which in most cases meant keeping the siblings together. A parent being regarded as ‘on board’ often seemed to be more influential over a social worker’s decision making than their demonstrating an ability to care for and protect their children.

## **7.2 Parents who were perceived to have abused their children**

Parents whom social workers regarded as having abused their children and whose children had therefore been removed from their care were not regarded as well-intentioned protective. They were not regarded as wanting the best for their children or having the intention to try to protect them. As indicated in the previous chapter there were six families where all of the children had been removed from their parents’ care due to concerns about sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, domestic violence, or neglect. In all six cases the sibling sexual behaviour became known after the children had been removed from their parents, although it may have started before then. From the social workers’ accounts it appeared that abusive parents were not given any say in subsequent decisions about whether or not siblings could live together or maintain contact.

In all six cases attempts were made to place siblings together, ideally with other family members, but resource limitations sometimes meant the siblings were placed separately. Contact was maintained between all of the siblings, and in all six cases the sibling sexual behaviour that became known took place between siblings placed together.

All six of the mothers and three of the fathers initially maintained supervised contact with the children. The siblings therefore often had supervised contact with each other at the same time, not always all at once. Contact with abusive parents added a layer of complexity to sibling contact arrangements, and extra rules were sometimes

introduced to try to prevent siblings whispering or being on their own together where they might become conduits for indirect contact with abusive parents. The participants did not give any examples of contact between siblings being stopped for this reason. Contact with four of the mothers and two of the fathers was stopped when it was regarded by the social workers as distressing for the children, sometimes after lengthy proceedings.

Stopping parent contact was not an irreversible decision if the parent engaged with social work to address their abusive behaviour and whatever issues prevented them from contributing to their children’s well-being. An abusive parent could become a well-intentioned protective parent. None of the parents whose contact had been stopped engaged in this way, and while the social workers continued to reach out to these parents, their accounts suggested that the parents were not influential in decision making regarding the contact and living arrangements of the siblings.

Two mothers and one father continued to maintain contact with their children. The father, regarded as a potential risk of sexual abuse, maintained supervised contact with his son but there was no question of the boy having unsupervised contact or living with him. The father did not have any relationship with his son’s half-sister and did not appear to have any influence over decision making regarding sibling contact and living arrangements. The two mothers were described as having problem alcohol use, and as having allowed their children to be exposed to sexual and other abuse within the household, rather than as having directly abused the children. If these mothers were able to engage with social work to address their difficulties, and if they were able to come ‘on board’ in the terms described above, then it would be possible for their children to be returned home, as happened eventually in one of these cases.

There seemed to be three classifications of parents. Parents regarded as abusive would not be able to look after any of their children and if at all may only have supervised contact with them. They did not have any influence over decision making



regarding sibling contact and living arrangements once the sibling sexual behaviour became known. Parents regarded neither as abusive nor well-intentioned protective would not be able to look after or have unsupervised contact with all of their children following the sibling sexual behaviour becoming known. A decision would need to be made about whether the perpetrator or victim would need to be removed from their care, and subsequent sibling contact would need to be supervised. They would retain some influence over decision making and could increase this influence if they made steps towards becoming well-intentioned protective. Social workers would support the decisions of parents regarded as well-intentioned protective, which usually meant the siblings continuing to live together or returning to live together at home. Parents could move between these three classifications in both directions, and there was evidence of their doing so where the parents had been involved in physical abuse, neglect, and domestic violence. It did not seem, however, that a parent could relieve themselves of the label as a sexual abuser.

The parents I will focus on below are those whose children were living with them or having unsupervised contact with them at the time the sexual behaviour became known. These parents were not, at least at that time, regarded as abusive. I will explore how the social workers reached a judgement of such parents as well-intentioned protective, how stable these judgements were, and what influence they had on the social workers’ decision making regarding separation, unsupervised contact, and reunification.

### **7.3 Ticking all the boxes in the short-term**

In the previous chapter an extract from an interview with Fiona illustrated a focus on safety to the preclusion of considering the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour. Fiona remarked that the mother had “ticked all the boxes” in terms of the immediate safety of the children, who could therefore remain living together with her at home. ‘Ticking all the boxes’ referred to a number of the parent’s behaviours, which appeared to indicate that the parent was ‘on board’ and therefore ‘well-intentioned protective’.

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Whether parents were regarded as on board depended largely upon the degree to which they engaged with services such as social work or other voluntary organisations. In the short-term this meant that the parents needed to acknowledge that the behaviour had happened, report it to the authorities, and be willing to work with a support agency. Parents’ reporting the behaviour to the authorities was frequently cited by the participants as a reason to think that the siblings could remain living at home or having unsupervised contact. Liz discussed a case where a step-father reported the sibling sexual behaviour:

And I suppose if it wasn't for him we probably wouldn't have known about it. So at least on some level he was being protective. (Liz)

Liz makes a direct connection between the parent reporting the behaviour and an inference that he could be considered protective. In this case, however, the mother initially did not acknowledge or believe that the behaviour had happened and accused one of the younger children of fabricating the allegations. She became angry when the social worker suggested this was inappropriate. The mother did not appear to have a shared understanding of the problem or be someone with whom the social worker felt she could work. Being seen as the parent primarily responsible for the children, contact between the siblings was stopped:

Liz:            Basically, we went to speak to the mum, who minimised the risk and said that it didn't happen.

[Contact] was stopped on the advice of [specialist service for children who have been sexually abused], um, following the disclosures made by the kids. And it was mainly due, it was mainly due to thinking that the mum couldn't, she was minimising the risk, so therefore couldn't, and it was difficult, it was difficult to establish when home contact be reinstated.

Peter:        Sorry, so the contact was stopped mainly because mum was minimising the risk and=

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Liz: =Yeah, so we were thinking how, how is she going to be able to protect them if she's not going to supervise. (Liz)

Without demonstrating a shared understanding of the problem by believing the incident happened and being willing to work with services, the mother was not considered protective, as having the intention to supervise the children. The decision was taken against the mother's wishes to stop contact between the siblings.

Two participants commented that a parent not believing the behaviour had happened might actually be an indication that a parent was well-intentioned, albeit that they could not at that point in time be considered protective:

You know, it might be that their kids have to be removed for the short-term anyway, because you know this whole denial about it couldn't have happened. It never happened. To me, that's not always a negative thing. You know, I think if you jump in on that and they say they deny that, I think if that's prolonged but at the initial crisis stage, I think it's healthy for parents to sometimes react like that, because the disbelief to me shows that, no way. To me, it shows that they have no prior knowledge. (Mary)

For Mary, a parent disbelieving that the behaviour had taken place would indicate that the parent was not at that time protective, and at least one of the children would need to be removed in the short-term. However, this kind of denial might also indicate that they had no prior intimation that they had ignored of the sibling sexual behaviour taking place and therefore be a normal and understandable initial reaction for a shocked and well-intentioned parent. The parent might still be someone with whom the social worker could work and in time get on board. The parent initially not believing the behaviour had happened should not preclude them from being considered protective in the longer-term, as long as at some stage the parent was able to acknowledge that the behaviour took place.

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Liz expressed something similar:

Because that is one of the things, actually, that did annoy me at the time, that (sighs) it was stopped on, obviously it was stopped on the basis of her not believing. But, I can remember thinking to myself, but she needs work done. Nobody just, that must be really hard to believe that, that you would do that. (Liz)

Liz expresses the view that it must be hard for anyone to believe that a child would display potentially harmful sexual behaviour towards a sibling. This behaviour would not fit with Liz’s expectations of children or sibling relationships. Liz therefore anticipates that a parent might find it especially hard to believe that their child had behaved in such a way, and should be offered help to come to terms with it. In the short-term a parent not believing that the behaviour had taken place might not compromise the social worker’s view of them as being well-intentioned, albeit that at that stage they could not be considered protective.

On the other hand, the parents reporting the behaviour and acknowledging that it had happened had a strong influence over a number of the social workers in the decisions they made to allow siblings to continue living together or maintaining unsupervised contact. Jenny reflected on what resulted from the parents’ reporting to the previous social worker of sexual behaviour having taken place between the siblings:

I think they were given, do you know, advice, it doesn’t, I remember at the time when I picked up the, it didn’t look like there’d been significant social work involvement, I guess, do you know the parents would have been viewed as certainly very much on board with knowing what was right and wrong, and what was acceptable and what wasn’t, they’d reported it in the first place, so they’d have been given advice. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

The social work department had worked with this family extensively prior to the incident of sibling sexual behaviour. The new information of this incident did not threaten the parents’ being regarded as well-intentioned or protective on the basis that they had engaged with social work by reporting the behaviour and were willing

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to accept support. They were regarded as sharing the social worker’s understanding of right and wrong; they were “very much on board”. The siblings could therefore continue to have unsupervised contact, with an offer of advice being considered a sufficient response.

Had the information come to social work’s attention other than from the parents, the response may have been different:

I think, otherwise, if it had been a second person, I think, in my experience thereafter, when it's not been that case, or the young person's made the disclosure themselves and not the parents... (Mary)

This suggests that the way the case is perceived and approached by the social workers may be strongly influenced by the way the case comes to their attention. If parents report the behaviour they may be seen as well-intentioned protective and the case may be approached as one of parents needing advice and support. If the information were to come from someone other than the parents then the initial impression of the parents may be quite different, with the parents being viewed more sceptically and with the potential for different decisions to be made.

The parent reporting the sexual behaviour was said to be very influential in the decision in the case discussed by Mary to allow the children to remain living together at home. When asked what had influenced the previous social worker in their decision making, Mary responded:

Er, the parents. And I think it was the fact of the parents were fully on board... They were the ones that went ahead to social work. They didn't have to disclose that, who would know? They were the ones that went ahead with the information. They wanted support. They fully wanted support. They recognised that he might be accommodated, but they wanted to try at least attempt to have him at home. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

The parents here ticked a number of boxes to demonstrate that they were on board. They showed that they had a shared understanding of the problem by reporting the

behaviour, believing that it happened, and recognising that the older brother might need to be accommodated. It could be inferred that the parents were protective.

In addition, wanting support, being willing to prioritise the needs of the victim but showing commitment to both children by wanting to attempt to keep them at home, demonstrated that the parents were well-intentioned, the kind of parents with whom the social worker felt she could work. The parents were “fully on board”. This was clearly stated by Mary as her understanding of why the decision was made for the siblings to continue living at home.

Thus far the examples have illustrated how the social workers established the parent-social worker relationship through their interactions with the parents. Emma highlighted the potential significance of reading back through the case files as another way to influence how the parent-social worker relationship may be established and the influence this could have on decision making. Emma reported that the previous worker had made a decision to allow the children to remain living with the parents on the basis that they had reported the behaviour and had engaged with services. The social worker remained very concerned about the sexual behaviour, however, and unsure whether the children could remain at home in the longer-term. When allocated the case, Emma said that she formed the view from reading the case files that the parents were struggling to manage because of the difficult issues they faced, rather than being competent parents who were not managing the sexual behaviour displayed by their children. Emma interpreted the sibling sexual behaviour as occurring within a context of parents who faced very difficult personal issues, and considered that there may be scope to work with the parents to improve the home situation:

When I inherited the case it was, ‘oh there's sexualised behaviour let's all panic. Well, this is all it's about. Oh, these parents are marvellous. They're doing this, this and this.’  
Yeah, they were doing stuff, but, actually when I went back and read the files, they were saying, ‘oh there's no problems before this’. Problems dated back, right back, and we were

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looking at lack of parental guidance, um, parents with their own issues.

We knew that there were clear issues that needed to be addressed and it gave you something to work on rather than, these people just can't do it. It gave it a context. Gave it a real context. (Emma)

For Emma, understanding that the parents had “their own issues” by reading the case files allowed her to interpret the sibling sexual behaviour as a problem within the family as a whole rather than as a problem caused only by the children. The parents had previously struggled to supervise the children adequately to protect them from abuse and from behaving in ways that were harmful to others, but Emma interpreted this lack of parenting skill as temporary due to difficulties in the parents’ lives, rather than the boys’ behaviour being beyond the control of even competent parents. There was potential for change and scope to work with the parents. The parents were engaging with voluntary services, and rather than removing the boys, Emma saw the potential to address some of the underlying difficulties faced by the parents, which in turn would help them to manage and reduce the boys’ sexual behaviours.

In developing a relationship with the parents, Emma made the following comments:

But I knew that, from what, what I knew of mum, certainly, I knew that there was a great deal of emotional warmth there. And a real, although kind of compromised at that point, there was a real determination to be a family and be a good family. And to give her boys a better upbringing than she'd ever had. And I knew that they had a strong relationship, mum and dad, so I'm thinking, there's some really good stuff going on here. (Emma)

Although the parents were initially resistant to social work involvement, Emma’s perception that the mother was warm and committed to her children, and that she had a strong relationship with the father, suggested that the parents were well-intentioned and therefore the kind of parents with whom Emma could work. This perception was further evidenced by the parents’ engagement with a voluntary organisation:

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I mean they were already trying to do stuff and it was evident from the work with [Voluntary Organisation] that they were committed to their kids. (Emma)

Without having necessarily demonstrated an ability to protect their children at that time, the parents were regarded as sharing an understanding of the problem, as being protective insofar as having the intention to protect, on the basis that they had reported the behaviour and engaged with the voluntary organisation. This engagement supported Emma’s view that the parents were well-intentioned, and her approach was to work with the parents to support the children remaining at home. As well as inferring from the social worker’s relationship with a parent that the parent was well-intentioned in their relationship with their children, this inference could be made in the other direction. If a parent was regarded as well-intentioned in their relationship with their children, the social worker could infer that the parent was someone with whom they could work.

Barbara similarly described a case where the children were allowed to remain living at home because the mother had reported the behaviour to social work, wanted the children to remain at home, and had shown a willingness to accept support. There was only one case discussed by Brian, whereby parents who displayed the qualities and behaviours to be regarded as well-intentioned protective resulted initially in the siblings being separated. The parents had impressed Brian by contacting the authorities to seek support over the sibling sexual behaviour:

The fact that dad and mum called it in themselves, it must have been a really difficult thing for dad, especially because it’s his son from a previous relationship. (Brian)

Unlike the case discussed by Barbara, in this case the parents did not want the children to continue living together at home and had decided that both the father and the older brother needed to move out of the family home to live together elsewhere. The parents were regarded as well-intentioned in that they had engaged with services, and had prioritised the needs of the victim while still showing a continued commitment to all of the children. They were regarded as protective, again through



their engagement with services and their decision to separate the children’s living arrangements. They appeared to be ‘on board’, and Brian supported the parents’ decision to refuse contact between the two siblings.

This contrasts with the cases discussed by Laura and George. The parents in these cases had made decisions to prevent the siblings from having contact with each other, but these decisions were not supported by the social workers. The parents were regarded as protective only insofar as they would prevent any further sexual behaviour from occurring, but were otherwise not seen to share the social workers’ understanding of the problem. One parent did not appear to hold the older brother responsible for his behaviour, and the other set of parents blamed the older brother entirely and cast him as a sexual abuser. The parents were not regarded as well-intentioned in that they cut all ties with the older brother, therefore not showing a commitment to both children. The parents were not on board and the social workers, while effectively powerless to change the parents’ decisions, did not support their decisions to refuse contact between the siblings.

Returning to the case discussed by Brian, he was particularly impressed with the mother of the younger sister:

Yes, mum was very upset, um, I think she had taken him into the home, and she had treated him as her son, and what impressed me about her was the fact that she didn’t then just completely turn against him. She was, um, very understanding about the need to keep them apart, and I think there was no way she would have let him back into her house anyway, but she was also very proactive about getting him support, and help, and getting support for the little girl as well.

She refused to allow the two younger siblings to meet with him and...I always, I felt at the time that that was a positive thing because she was a protective factor and this is how she felt that she was going to protect her daughter who was the most vulnerable in this situation. (Brian, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

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In addition to engaging with services and being willing to prioritise the needs of the victim while showing a continued commitment to both children, this mother demonstrated an emotional response to the events that had taken place. In this way the mother had ticked all the boxes to demonstrate a shared understanding of the problem, that she was someone with whom Brian felt he could work, and whose decisions he could therefore support. Unusually this meant stopping the sibling contact.

Brian said that he had not undertaken any kind of risk assessment of the situation as it was felt there was no need to do so:

Peter:     You said right, way back at the beginning, before we’d even switched the tape on, that there wasn’t really ever any formal assessment done around the boy, the family, and=

Brian:     =No, no. Why?

Peter:     Yeah!

Brian:     Why. Um, well I suppose, the reason being was we had no, we had no intention of going down the statutory route... There was no risk of him going back home... There was no need to sit down and do a big huge risk assessment, um, to be honest with you I think at the time, the situation became so stable that it was going to be closed, you know... the general view that we were taking, is that the family could manage it. (Brian)

The decisions of well-intentioned protective parents could be supported, and there may be no need for the social worker to assess the situation formally or work with the family beyond providing advice and support.

Similarly, having taken over this same case, Angela reported supporting the parents’ later decision to reinstate sibling contact. Angela trusted that the parents had made sure the younger sibling was happy to see her older brother. There was otherwise nothing to indicate that sibling contact was any more or less appropriate now than it had been before:

I think it just was a matter of time. A few months down the line I think the dad had kind of spoken to the step-mum and they had agreed that he could come round you know for an hour or so. (Angela)

If parents were regarded as well-intentioned protective, social workers would support their decisions without necessarily undertaking their own assessment. Most of the time this meant keeping siblings together. Parents were regarded as well-intentioned protective on the basis of the degree to which the social worker thought that the parents shared their understanding of the problem and were people with whom the social worker felt they could work, the degree to which the parents were ‘on board’. Parents could demonstrate being on board by reporting the behaviour and being willing to work with services. Being emotional in response to the situation, and showing a commitment to both children while being willing to prioritise the needs of the victim would also demonstrate being well-intentioned protective. Disbelieving that the behaviour had happened might not necessarily preclude a parent from being considered well-intentioned, albeit that they could not be considered protective in the short-term. If parents were not considered well-intentioned protective, it would not be possible for the parents to continue looking after or having unsupervised contact with the perpetrator and victim simultaneously. Reading back through the case files might influence the social worker’s judgement of the parents and how the parent-social worker relationship was established.

### **7.3.1 Covering all the bases**

Another facet to the case discussed by Brian was that the father moving to live elsewhere with his son meant that all of the children could remain being looked after by a well-intentioned protective parent while still ensuring their immediate physical and sexual safety. Brian commented:

So we were in a situation that allowed us to separate them without it being too traumatic for any of the children, um, I suppose you’re kind of covering all the bases. (Brian)

In Mary’s opinion an ability to ‘cover all the bases’ facilitated social workers to make the decision more easily to separate the siblings’ living arrangements following

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the sibling sexual behaviour becoming known. Being able to separate the parenting role meant that the social worker was not in such a difficult position to have to choose between the siblings in terms of who stayed with family and who did not:

With some of the other cases I think because there's been, um, parents have been separated. So the siblings have went to stay with the other parent, anyway. So that might have been the easy option out. For this case, there was nobody. (Mary)

In the case Mary discussed there was more pressure to keep the siblings together as there was no other family placement available for the older brother. Jenny similarly described a scenario where the siblings remained living together in part for that reason. It was discovered that the younger sister had moved in to live with the family of her older brother, with whom there had been previous incidents of harmful sexual behaviour:

Part of the child protection plan, is that my young person moved out, but the agreement was that we could do that in a planned way because there was a general acceptance that it would be hard for him, but that in the meantime there wasn't a better option and she didn't need to be accommodated so she could stay where she was with supports, while that process happened, and even that to me I was a bit like, well if she's safe to be there for the-, given that she's been there for X amount of months already because we didn't know, and now we're letting her stay there until we can somehow resolve, but what we're saying is actually she shouldn't be there because he shouldn't be there. So, then it becomes about resources a little bit doesn't it? (Jenny, discussing a case involving a (by then) 18 year-old brother and 13 year-old sister)

According to Jenny, the older brother was allowed to remain living at home in part because he was still regarded as a vulnerable child; without an alternative family placement it was acknowledged that moving out would be difficult for him and time needed to be given to find suitable supported accommodation. Jenny therefore questioned why the older brother would need to leave the family home at all, and suggested that the decision was resource-led. Jenny later retracted this suggestion; nonetheless it seems easier to countenance separating siblings' living arrangements if

the social worker can cover all the bases by separating the well-intentioned protective parenting role, therefore keeping children together with their families and managing risk at the same time. In the absence of such an option there is much more pressure to keep both children together at home.

### **7.3.2 Not ticking all the boxes in the short-term**

The example of the case discussed by Liz towards the beginning of this chapter highlighted that the decisions of parents not considered well-intentioned protective might not be supported. A further example of a mother failing to tick all the boxes provides confirmation of the behaviours and qualities the social workers looked for in the parents. In the case discussed by Karen, the behaviour was reported by another relative; the sexual behaviour was denied by the older brother and disbelieved by the mother, who wanted the older brother to return home immediately after the police interview had been conducted. Karen did not consider the mother to be well-intentioned or protective:

Because mum wasn't, you know, like there was other mothers who'd be like, well, we'll just wait and, we'll see and we'll do a bit more assessment and he's fine to stay with my sister right just now, or whatever. There's some mums who would say, I'm not having him back, which is what in this other case was like. It was very clear-cut. She wasn't going to have him back in the house. And it was very protective. It wasn't the same with Deirdre. She wanted her son back. Um, so it was difficult to, kind of, process all that at the same time as trying to make an assessment of what was in Roger's [the younger brother's] best interests. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Refusing to allow the older brother to come home might have been considered protective, and possibly well-intentioned to the extent that it would prioritise the needs of the victim over the perpetrator. The mother in this case was not considered well-intentioned or protective, however, as she did not allow time to consider the needs of the younger brother before insisting on the return home of the older brother. Karen also expressed concern about this mother's lack of emotional response, her

failure to prioritise the needs of the younger brother, and a lack of acknowledgement that the behaviour had taken place:

I think maybe mum's reaction as well was concerning, you know, that she could hear all these things that, her children were saying about each other and, and really was, prioritising Liam's needs over Roger's I think.

You know, she was really, quite dead-pan, you know not, I mean, if someone was describing that had happened to my son, um, you know, you'd be devastated. But, you know, from the outset she didn't believe it I don't think, or couldn't believe it. (Karen)

The mother was not demonstrating the kinds of responses that Karen expected from a well-intentioned protective parent, using her own anticipated responses as a guide. The mother did not share Karen's understanding of the problem or seem like the kind of parent with whom she could work. Karen acknowledged the potential difficulty for a parent of believing that one of their children had sexually abused another, but was worried about both boys continuing to live at home on the basis of the mother's response. She did not support the mother's decision to keep both brothers together, and would like to have made a decision to remove one of the children. However, in the absence of proof that the behaviour had taken place she did not believe that she had the legal power to do so. As indicated in chapter four, had the perpetrator been an adult, Karen believed that she would have been able to secure a child protection order, which would have given her the legal power to remove the younger brother from the house.

That having been said, it was not essential for a parent to tick every single one of the boxes in order for the social worker to support the parent's wishes for the siblings to remain living together. In the following extract, Fiona summarised her dilemma about whether or not the siblings would need to be separated, feeling responsible for the safety of the younger brother, but at the same time aware of the vulnerability of the older brother. On the basis that the mother had reported the behaviour and had

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seemed willing to work with services, Fiona considered that she deserved to be given the chance to keep the boys at home:

So I wasn’t comfortable, um, and very mindful of the responsibility of the younger one’s safety, but the safety of Phil, still very young and vulnerable himself but, er, equally we had mum saying she didn’t want the boys separated and mum had done the right thing.

What she did was act appropriately, you know, she did everything in a timeous way, um, and she needed to be given that opportunity.

I had no evidence to go down the accommodated way, really, I had a secure presenting parent that had reported it blah, blah, blah, you know. (Fiona, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Soon after her initial meetings with the mother, however, she reflected upon them and began to worry about the mother’s emotional response to events:

She wasn’t a distressed mother, she was an angry mum, she was an articulate one, but there was no shock, there was no distress. She wasn’t even, I would say, she wasn’t even, mindful and, or in touch with what this would even mean for the younger boy, for her son, you know. There’s no evidence like that at all.

I remember she was very, very calm, very concrete, very kind of, you know, and almost like at the time I remember also thinking, it was almost as if she was part of the professional setting. (Fiona)

Having been initially impressed by the mother’s calm and ostensibly responsible approach, Fiona began to worry about the mother’s emotional response and her apparent lack of awareness of the potential impact of the sexual behaviour on the younger brother. To put it another way, Fiona began to worry about the extent to which the mother really was well-intentioned and fully on board. Fiona had not consciously acknowledged the significance of the mother’s emotional response at the time. The mother reporting the behaviour and accepting supports had been sufficient

for her wishes to be supported to allow the children to remain at home. The mother had not needed to tick all the boxes.

The mother had not been known to social work prior to the incident of the sibling sexual behaviour. Scott provided an example where the family had had considerable previous social work involvement. In this case the mother reported the behaviour, believed that it had happened and was committed to her children to the extent that she maintained relationships with them both. She engaged with social work in that she kept appointments. However, there had already been a long history of the mother being criticised for her parenting style and her lack of willingness to change. She did not appear to share an understanding of the problem or be someone with whom Scott felt he could work constructively. The mother made her own decision for the older brother to be removed from the house, but Scott was clear he would not have countenanced the possibility of both children staying at home and having unsupervised contact:

I do think we are very cautious of mum. We feel mum's got her own agenda, that the mum, er, has her own ideas about how things should be done. And clearly the pattern is that mum's approaches have been criticised in the past by psychologists, by health workers and now by social work. And actually we don't trust mum to keep, keep him safe... When I was thinking through, the issue was about mum perhaps not wanting him in the house, but also it would have been about the wider picture of can we trust this situation to remain safe. (Scott)

It is not essential for a parent to tick all of the boxes in the short-term to be considered well-intentioned protective if the parent has not been known to social work in the past. However, if the parent has been known to social work before the incident of the sibling sexual behaviour there are other criteria the social worker can draw upon in order to consider whether or not a parent is fully on board. In that event ticking some of the boxes may not be sufficient for both children to remain living at home.



## 7.4 Ticking all the boxes in the longer-term

Moving beyond the very early decision making about whether siblings could remain living with their parents or having unsupervised contact immediately following the sibling sexual behaviour coming to light, both the demands and the opportunities increased for parents to be considered well-intentioned protective. The participants said that the parents needed to continue engaging with services, and for some participants this meant that in addition to staying in touch with services the parents were required to address issues of parenting which may have allowed the sexual behaviour to take place. A commitment to address these issues was at times sufficient to influence decisions, rather than parents necessarily having to demonstrate that the issues had been fully addressed. Parents could demonstrate a commitment to their children by visiting them regularly if they had been accommodated, and parents who had not initially been regarded as well-intentioned protective might be able to change the social worker’s decisions by engaging with services.

Alongside the rules discussed in the last chapter as part of the safety planning, Emma introduced a rule which required the parents to engage with services in order to address the ways in which their parenting had allowed or supported the sibling sexual behaviour to take place. The principal rule nonetheless remained that the parents stay in contact with services:

And then one of the other ones which was kind of immediate, but was more far-reaching one was, you need to, let's look at your own issues and how they're impacting on, because I know that you two can parent.

You need to be picking up a phone. You need to be a bit more proactive. So, they were the kind of key things. There were obviously longer-term goals that we needed, and we're still working towards, but, you know, stop, you know, actually not avoid professionals was the first. (Emma, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours by nine year-old boys to brothers aged six and five)

Primarily Emma required the parents to keep in touch with services, but the level of the parents’ engagement was expected to deepen in terms of addressing issues of parenting which could reduce the likelihood of sibling sexual behaviour recurring in the longer-term. By addressing these deeper issues the parents could enhance their credibility as being well-intentioned protective. Barbara similarly encouraged the parents in the cases she discussed to engage with help to address issues of their parenting.

For other social workers there were decisions to be made about whether siblings could reunify, by returning home or re-introducing contact. In a case discussed by James the commitment that the mother showed to her son by visiting him regularly demonstrated that she was well-intentioned. Working individually to develop her understanding of his behaviour demonstrated that she was increasingly coming to a shared understanding of the problem and could therefore be considered protective. This contributed to her son’s return home:

So mum, was right OK. Er, I’ll do that. I want to do that. I want to work towards him, you know, coming back to [City] and the rest of it. So we done that. Erm, she then went through every week and met with him. Er for the time that he was there.

And, you know, we done some work, family work between Dean and his mum and er some individual work with mum as well or, about, you know, the behaviour and, you know, sexually harmful behaviour. And, and mum, again, seems to have a really good grasp of it and the rest of it. And, er, and we obviously working towards him coming back to [City].  
(James, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his sister (aged one) and brother (aged three))

The older brother returned home once the mother had completed the work that had been asked of her, and once the older brother had completed a lengthy programme of work to address his sexual behaviour, concluding in a lowered assessment of risk.

In a case discussed by Gordon, a mother regarded as having allowed her children to be abused continued to engage with social work and was said to have visited her

children frequently and reliably. Having addressed her own difficulties with alcohol, acknowledged that sexual behaviour had taken place between the siblings and having agreed to implement a strict safety plan, she moved from being regarded as abusive to being seen as well-intentioned protective. Her children were returned to her care, although as it turned out her ability to look after both children had been over-estimated and the placement at home quickly broke down.

In the case discussed by Jenny, the decision to re-introduce contact took place before the parents had completed the work required of them. The parents had attended and contributed to decision making meetings and had been regarded as “brilliant at engaging” (Jenny) with support services. Under considerable pressure from the parents to re-introduce contact, Jenny decided that this could be allowed on the basis of the parents’ demonstrated good intentions:

And even though originally when we did the blanket she can’t come and they’d accepted that, very very quickly ‘when can she come, when can she come, when can she be here?’

There was so much pressure from the family, they wanted her there, um, what they were saying was that she wanted to be there, um, and all of those kinds of things and the family I guess had given us no reason to think. Do you know, we’d done a lot of work with them... Every time I’d done work with him I’d fed back to Mum and Dad and we’d talked about, do you know, so it felt like they were really on board, really understood and as long as we spelt things out really clearly to them that it was perhaps manageable. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Jenny had resisted the pressure to re-introduce contact between the children for some time, and in this last phrase showed some continued hesitation to do so. Jenny continued to harbour doubts about the parents’ ability to maintain a safe environment. However, with the parents having shown such commitment to engaging with services, with the feeling that the parents “were really on board”, it seemed difficult to resist their pressure any longer even though they had not yet completed work to address their parenting issues.

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By contrast, parents not being considered on board would militate against a decision to reintroduce unsupervised contact. When pressed by another professional to reintroduce unsupervised contact, Liz made the following comment:

I'm sure they were arguing, at hearings for contact to be unsupervised. And I think at that point we were still arguing no, because, I think for us, no work had ever been done, especially with the mum, because she never engaged. (Liz)

The mother had kept appointments with services, but had not done any meaningful work to acknowledge that the behaviour had happened or to show she could keep her children safe. She did not have a shared understanding of the problem and was not considered to be either well-intentioned or protective. However, when coming under pressure to reunite the siblings due to the older sibling coming to an age when she could leave the care system and return home, the mother engaging with services to the extent of acknowledging the behaviour happened did seem to be sufficient to make a decision to allow unsupervised contact. Liz was not convinced that the mother had genuinely changed her parenting approach or her stance on the issue of whether the sibling sexual behaviour had taken place:

And as time went on mum and step-dad became more protect–, or, whether, whether they became more protective or whether they were saying the right things, I don't know.

Maybe they were just saying the right things, which I presumed they were to be honest.

It's hard to assess whether they've been genuine when they're, wee mind shifts and start saying the right things. Or are they just saying what, what they know that you need to hear for contact to be progressed. And that's difficult to determine. You can only really take their word for it really. (Liz, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old girl and siblings aged 12, eight and six)

In this instance the parents had not convinced Liz that they were genuinely on board, but under pressure to reunite the children Liz felt that she had to take the parents at their word. The parents' engaging with services was sufficient for Liz to reintroduce unsupervised contact.

To be considered well-intentioned protective in the longer-term parents need to engage with services at a deeper level in order to address issues of parenting and to develop their understanding of the sexual behaviour. When under pressure to reunite siblings, however, it might not be necessary for parents to complete this work for social workers to support such a decision; indeed it might be sufficient for parents to engage at only a superficial level. Parents may not need to be regarded as fully on board in order for siblings to return home. I will discuss below what parents needed to demonstrate in order to keep siblings together if they remained living at home or having unsupervised contact.

## 7.5 Breaking rules

As mentioned above and discussed in the previous chapter, when decisions were made to keep siblings together, rules were introduced to try to keep the siblings safe in terms of the recurrence of any sexual behaviour. Whether the parents kept or broke the rules had only an inconsistent impact on whether the current sibling living and contact arrangements could be maintained. Parents being regarded as well-intentioned protective was often more influential in the social workers’ decision making than whether the parents demonstrated an ability to protect their children.

As mentioned above, Fiona began to doubt the degree to which the mother was on board when reflecting back on her emotional presentation. Fiona later noted a concern that the mother did not engage meaningfully with the services put in place. The expected level of engagement went beyond keeping appointments:

And I think that progressively, what we noticed is mum, who’d agree to very little meaningful stuff actually, and she really struggled to engage with the [specialist service for children with harmful sexual behaviour] assessment and people coming to the house. (Fiona, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Ruth clarified what was meant by ‘meaningful stuff’:

She wasn’t able to look at her own kind of experiences, she wasn’t able to look at how the boundaries in terms of her

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parents and, you know, she was quite happy to label Phil as an abuser, um, and accept that and work towards that but actually any, any remote suggestion, you know, that there might be work for her to do as well she just couldn’t, couldn’t take herself there...She was quite happy for social care workers to go in and take the boys out or whatever but any meaningful engagement, you know, she wasn’t really willing to do any of the work. (Ruth)

The mother did not share Ruth’s understanding of the problem. Ruth did not agree with the mother’s perspective in labelling Phil as an abuser. Ruth had also formed the view that the mother was not just unable but unwilling to address her parenting issues. It began to be doubted that she was well-intentioned and protective. The mother continued to engage insofar as she kept appointments, and her lack of meaningful engagement did not immediately result in a decision to remove any of the children. However, when the mother broke the rules by leaving the boys unsupervised, during which a further incident of sexual behaviour took place, Ruth and Fiona had no hesitation in recommending that the brothers needed to live separately. The reason that they gave for being so clear was:

Fiona: For me it was mother=

Ruth: =Yes it was the protective factor that we understood that she might be, and I think that, um, and it was about her capacity to keep the boys safe and other people safe and she was making choices that made them unsafe, you know, and put them at risk.

Fiona: We were very, you know, very clear in terms of the concern that we had about the lack of supervision, even though it had been made very clear and explicit by Ruth on the day, she still chose, you know, to expose the children...still chose to make poor decisions and expose the children to harm, you know, and, er, so when that was said and, you know, um, then that’s when, you know, you do see with her at that time, um, no responsibility, you know, doesn’t want to hear or accept, either unwilling or, I’m not I’m still convinced if it was an unwilling or unable to kind

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of, um, to take responsibility, I think it was  
unwilling. (Fiona and Ruth)

The second incident was the trigger for the decision to be made to remove the older brother from the family home, but the social workers suggest that the mother no longer being regarded as on board, no longer being considered well-intentioned protective, was what influenced this decision rather than the sexual behaviour itself. What seemed to be salient for these social workers was not just that the mother had failed to supervise the children properly, but that she had appeared unwilling to supervise them properly. She had not only broken the rules, but had done so wilfully. The second incident resulted in a decision to remove the older brother, leaving the younger brother at home. This mother was no longer considered well-intentioned protective and so could not look after both the perpetrator and the victim, but she was not considered abusive.

A second incident of sibling sexual behaviour also resulted in sibling contact being stopped in the case discussed by Jenny. Jenny’s opportunity to form an initial impression of the case was quite different from that of Emma, discussed above. Jenny had not had the chance to read through the case files, and rather than having the opportunity to get to know the family and form a personal view of the parents before a second incident of sibling sexual behaviour had occurred, Jenny took on the case with the second incident already having happened, and at the point that a further offence in the community was committed. The previous social worker had regarded the parents as well-intentioned and protective. A second incident challenged the view that the parents were protective, albeit that Jenny gave the benefit of the doubt to the parents in terms of their being well-intentioned. Contact was stopped between the siblings:

I think to begin with, I wouldn’t go so far as to say it was a knee-jerk reaction, but I think to begin with we didn’t know that we could keep her safe, so this had happened once before, the family had seemingly been very open and willing and I think that’s true, but I guess you then have to question their capacity to keep acting on the things that, that they’re saying.

I mean we pretty much had lock down in general because obviously like he'd committed this offence in the [month], obviously, I mean you'll know back then things didn't come through the system very quickly so I didn't, we didn't get it in the [month], I think we probably got it a month or two later and just as we picked it up he then got the [charge for further offence in the community], do you know so you've kind of got alarm bells going, oh right this keep happening. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his nine year-old sister)

Without having had the opportunity to form a relationship with the parents, and in the context of repeated incidents of sexual behaviour, Jenny made a clear distinction between the parents' protective intentions and their protective capacity. The parents' breaking the rules and failure to demonstrate an ability to protect the children resulted in the sibling contact being stopped.

If parents are considered not to be well-intentioned protective, or if the social worker has not yet had the opportunity to form a view of the parents, a second incident of sexual behaviour resulting from the parents' breaking the rules may influence the social worker to decide that the siblings need to live separately or to stop their contact. On the other hand, if the social worker does have the opportunity to form an independent view of the parents as well-intentioned protective, a second incident may not result in the removal of children from the family.

### **7.5.1 Making allowances**

Jenny made a decision to stop unsupervised sibling contact as a result of the parents' breaking the rules in a time before she had been able to form a relationship with them. Jenny had questioned the parents' capacity to protect the children. Over time, however, Jenny formed a personal view of the parents. The father impressed her with his commitment to his children:

Dad is very, protective of them, do you know, I mean if you ever made a suggestion that they couldn't stay with Dad he'd be (2 seconds) it's just kind of the opposite of what you normally see, do you know with kids staying with Mums, and Dads being absent, it's very much the opposite. (Jenny)



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Jenny describes the father as ‘protective’ and was impressed by the whole family’s level of engagement with services. Even before the assessment had been completed Jenny was clear about the conclusions:

I have to say that the family were really engaging, do you know, Mum, Dad, even him, really, do you know, did everything that we asked them to do, and certainly even though we were doing an assessment our recommendation was going to be that he didn’t need to be put on supervision, because they didn’t need to be on an order, do you know they were working voluntarily really, really well. (Jenny)

Jenny formed the view that the father was well-intentioned due to his level of commitment and engagement with services. She therefore attributed the poor conditions of the house to the father’s struggle to manage stress, rather than to any lack of care:

I mean if, when you see, if you were to see the house now, I think it’s just real (3 seconds) do you know unhygienic, um, not, certainly not a lack of care, um, certainly Dad...I think was always very well-intentioned, but I think more people just not managing. (Jenny)

Similarly, Jenny made allowances for the father’s drug use, interpreting his previous and more recent taking of drug overdoses as a struggle to manage stress rather than undermining her perception of his intention to be protective:

There was child protection case conferences. Um, Dad was struggling...Child protection case conference on the grounds of neglect, um, and Dad, social work referrals, Dad had taken an overdose...and I would probably say that that has been quite a common thing for Dad. He took two or three, when I was involved with the family, he just doesn’t cope with stress particularly well. (Jenny)

Having formed the view that the parents were well-intentioned protective, Jenny was able to make allowances for aspects of caring that had previously been queried in terms of whether they were neglectful or abusive. Jenny was also able to make allowances for the parents when they broke the rules:

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And so whether they disregarded, what we said, sometimes, maybe they did, um, certainly when she was back in...they didn't, it was only when I was there. 'Oh yeah she's been here for a couple of days!' 'Alright okay, were you going to tell', and they would've told me, I mean they weren't hiding it, but they never would think, 'oh I'd better phone and just see if that's okay'. (Jenny)

In this extract Jenny acknowledges that the parents might sometimes disregard the rules, and despite a clear agreement that the siblings should not be left on their own together during contact, the parents had not reported that owing to other family circumstances they had made a decision for the two children actually to live together in their home. The parents had not sought permission from the social worker to introduce this arrangement. The view was maintained, however, that this was not through any intention of concealment. The parents were regarded as well-intentioned and so no immediate steps were taken to remove either child from the family; rather some further assessment was undertaken to judge whether the siblings could now remain living together. What had previously been a question of contact and reunification, as a result of circumstances and the parents' decisions now became a question of removal and separation.

Having had involvement with this family for some time, Jenny had developed greater certainty over what had happened between the siblings, how to interpret that behaviour, its impact, and the likelihood of future sexual behaviour occurring. Jenny made her own assessment of the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour on the younger sister and concluded that she appeared to be managing well. The younger sister expressed the view that she was happy to be living with her older brother. Jenny considered the older brother to be vulnerable, and assessed the continued risks he may present to his sister as low. Jenny was concerned that if he were asked to leave the family home without supportive alternative accommodation having been identified, the risks he may present to the community might increase. Jenny's analysis of the situation was that the siblings should be allowed to remain living together at home, and expressed this assessment to a child protection case conference.

Jenny was very unusual among the social workers in providing such a detailed analysis of a situation with reference to assessments both of risk and the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour. Jenny is a youth justice worker with prior experience of, and specialist training in, working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour. As has been highlighted in the previous chapters, there is evidence that the social workers with more experience, particularly those from youth justice, have taken a more analytical and assessment-based approach to their decision making. Melanie had discussed undertaking an assessment of the quality of a sibling relationship. Mary discussed assessing the quality of the sibling relationship and the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour on the victim. The decision to reunify siblings in a case discussed by James was predicated on risk assessment and substantial work having been completed by both the mother and the perpetrator.

Jenny believed that her assessment had some influence over the decision not to ask the older brother immediately to leave the family home, however:

I think probably what made the most difference was that the family, were prepared, to engage, um, and I think, I mean eventually his dad, was like ‘right, if he needs to mo-’, I mean the da-, very, very reluctant for him to move out, very supportive of both their children and really wanted to manage, being able to keep in contact with both and I think that came through really clearly. I think, dad then backed down and was prepared to say ‘right well if he does need to move, okay’, and that was really hard but they still did it, but I do wonder whether the fact that they really were prepared, yes we’ll do this, yes we’ll go there, whether that maybe made the difference and I think that kind of trust in the family, yes they made mistakes, they never made malicious, decisions, they never knowingly, as far as I’m concerned, they never knowingly made bad decisions, they just sometimes made bad decisions because they didn’t always think things through, um, but I think because of their absolute commitment to their children and their awareness of the-, I wonder if that’s what, kind of made things okay in the end.  
(Jenny)

Jenny’s interpretation of what seemed to make the most difference to the other social workers involved in the decision making was that the parents had demonstrated

being fully on board. They had engaged well with services, shown commitment to their children, and were prepared ultimately to put the needs of the victim first. Any poor decisions that the parents made were not regarded as wilful. They had not always managed to protect their children; their own actions had sometimes been harmful; they had not always adhered to the rules; but allowances could be made because the parents were regarded as well-intentioned protective.

Even multiple further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour and a number of examples of the parents breaking rules did not result in the children being separated in the case discussed by Emma. As mentioned earlier, Emma had read over the case files and got to know the parents following the initial incident and prior to any further incidents, forming the view that the parents were well-intentioned protective.

Following the initial incident and the making of rules, the parents broke the rules a number of times and in a number of ways: the children were left unsupervised; the sleeping arrangements were unaltered; medical appointments were not kept and the children did not consistently attend school. There followed a number of further incidents of sexual behaviour between the siblings. Emma commented that it was not the incidents themselves that made her question whether the children could remain living at home, but the responses of the children and the parents. After one particular incident, Emma commented:

So that's how we knew that this really had, even more that this had been premeditated. Um, yeah, it did worry us. But, not (sighs) I'm trying to think back. I think the fact that he was able to talk about it, and we were able to address it and look at his safety planning and um, yeah. Er, it didn't make, it didn't prompt us into saying, right let's get him right out of there. Er, 'cause I think there was a lot of guilt attached to it for him. He did feel bad about it. So, yeah. I don't think that, any more so than anything else, was a trigger. So, it was the reporting part, mum not reporting and then not accordingly shifting bedrooms, in terms of, let's look at this risk that's presented [that made us question whether the children could remain living at home]. (Emma, discussing a case involving sexual behaviours between nine year-old boys and their six and five year-old brothers)

As discussed in the chapter on maintaining a perspective of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, this boy expressing remorse for his behaviour meant that the behaviour was not labelled as abuse, despite its being premeditated. Emma referred to the behaviour as ‘sexualised behaviour’, drawing attention to the boy’s own victim experiences. The repetition of the behaviour did not prompt Emma to consider that the child might need to be removed from the family; rather it was the lack of timely reporting by the parents which triggered this question being raised. In addition, the parents had not implemented the safety plan, which raised doubts about whether they had a shared understanding of the problem. Taken together this undermined the view of the parents as well-intentioned protective. The parents had not demonstrated an ability to protect the children in that this was now a second incident, but it was the parents’ willingness to protect which was questioned by the lack of reporting. This was more salient in the consideration as to whether the children could remain in the family home:

I remember my manager at the time being, especially concerned that things weren’t reported straight away, and she said, what else is going on in that house that we don’t know?  
(Emma)

Emma repeatedly made the point that it was the lack of engagement, rather than the repeated sexual behaviours, which made her question whether the children could remain living at home:

And it was when mum and dad were shutting themselves off, and we couldn’t keep, or mon-, we couldn’t monitor the kids effectively where it was at points where management were saying, we need to consider whether those kids are going to be safe to stay there. They’re not attending to their needs. They’ve not got them in at school. We can’t monitor their behaviours. They’re not letting us in. It was more to do with that.

I think they became more insular. That was more, that became more of a worry for me rather than the sexualised behaviours, if that makes any sense. The fact that the, they were becoming more insular and cutting people off and, at least when they were being open, you know what you’re

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dealing with. You know, and you're able to discuss things  
and, and help and support. (Emma)

Whether the parents were ‘on board’ was more influential than the parents’  
demonstrated ability to protect the children. The importance of parental engagement  
was further highlighted by the response to the most recent incident of sibling sexual  
behaviour:

By that point I was actually past the thinking that we need to  
accommodate these kids. I was quite past that, because they  
were engaging really well by that point. (Emma)

When Emma started to work with the family the view was quickly formed that the  
parents were well-intentioned protective. This was based upon information contained  
within the case files that Emma made time to read, and the warm and committed  
approach the parents appeared to adopt towards each other and their children. One of  
the key sources of evidence of this commitment was the parents’ engagement with  
services and the parents’ initial reporting of the sibling sexual behaviour. Likewise, a  
lack of prompt reporting of subsequent behaviours and a lack of engagement with  
services posed the greatest threat to the view of the parents as well-intentioned  
protective, and put the children more at risk of being accommodated than the further  
incidents of sibling sexual behaviour. The view of the parents being well-intentioned  
protective endured despite the repeated incidents of sexual behaviour, the breaking of  
rules, and the episodes of lack of engagement. In accounting for how the family  
survived all of these threats, Emma made a number of comments at different stages:

But actually, what I can see in amongst this is just a fantastic  
family that needs support to get on their feet. And they have  
had horrible experiences but they can go on to do really, you  
know, to do well and, you know, I'm very, very fond of them.  
(Emma)

Emma suggests that she saw great potential in the family in amongst the difficulties  
they faced. She liked them: they were a family with whom she felt she could work.  
She also suggests that liking the family played a part in the decision making, and

reinforced this later in respect of her view of other professionals’ relationships with the family:

We're giving, I think people have made them a lot of allowances because they are incredibly likeable. (Emma)

Emma later refuted that decision making was to do with liking people, but suggested instead that the decisions were based in relationships and were difficult to explain solely on the basis of evidence:

It's not about liking people, like I say, it's about relationships. I think, the fact that people could see, that they were just struggling. And, people, anybody that's met them has had a real kind of, empathy for them and, just thought, you deserve to have this opportunity to stay together as a family.

I mean there were people that wanted them out of there, I remember, someone going, they should be out. And I'm like, no, wait a minute. Let's be calm, and rational, because they're not being calm and rational at this point. So someone needs to be. I don't know, it's a hard one just it, I think a lot of times this job you work on, you have to work on evidence, you have to work, you've got that kind of, sometimes that probability we need to look at that. But I think your gut feeling about a situation as well. I don't know. It's a hard one. (Laughs). I don't know what else to say!

If you met them, if you met them you would know what I mean. Um, and you know the kids just deserved, they wanted to be within their family. Now, you'll meet kids and you know it's right for them to be removed for a period or whatever. You don't really want to do it, but you know it's right, because you know that to get to improve things you can't do that if they're within that situation. But I just, they really, really strongly wanted to be with their family. It was their big, they're just, they're a hard one. You need to know them! (Laughs) (Emma)

It was hard for Emma to articulate quite how the decisions were made for the boys to remain living at home despite the parents repeatedly breaking rules, failing to engage with services, and despite further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour. The episodes of a lack of engagement brought the siblings closest to being separated, but the sense

of the parents as well-intentioned protective endured, partly because of the family’s strengths, and partly due to the degree to which Emma and other professionals liked them. They were a family with whom Emma continued to feel she could work. She remained optimistic. The parents being considered well-intentioned protective was ultimately more influential in the decision making than the parents demonstrating their ability to protect their children. Evidence was important, but the decisions were made not through a disinterested analysis of evidence, but intuitively in the context of relationships. Emma thought I would need to know the family in order to be able to make sense of the decisions made. Knowing the ‘facts’ or the ‘evidence’ is not sufficient. In this case it was clear that maintaining a perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective served to support siblings remaining together.

## 7.6 Conclusions

I have argued that in their accounts of their decision making, social workers do not indicate that their decisions are influenced by assessments of a parent’s ability or capacity to protect their children, if such assessments are indeed undertaken. Rather, social workers are influenced by an intuitive judgement of the parent’s character. The social workers do not ignore the evidence, but perceive and interpret the evidence within the context of their relationships with the parents and through the perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective. The parent’s character is judged along these two distinct but overlapping dimensions. If the parent is considered to share the social worker’s understanding of the problem it may be inferred that they are protective in relationship with their children; if the parent is someone with whom the social worker feels they can work, it may be inferred that they are well-intentioned with respect to their children. Taken together, parents considered to be ‘on board’ will be regarded as well-intentioned protective towards their children. The extent to which parents engage with services has a strong influence over the social worker’s judgement of the parents’ character across both dimensions. A perspective of the parents as well-intentioned protective may survive repeated incidents of sibling sexual behaviour or other evidence of parents not being able fully to protect their children from harm. Social workers support the wishes of well-intentioned protective



parents. Maintaining a perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective therefore serves to support siblings being together.

If parents are not considered well-intentioned protective they may not be able to continue looking after both the perpetrator and victim following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour. Typically it would be the perpetrator who would be removed from the family, leaving the other siblings at home. Supervised contact between the siblings would then be encouraged. Only abusive parents would not be allowed to look after any of their children or be allowed unsupervised contact.

The social workers’ expectations of parents varied according to the degree of pressure the social workers were under. Pressure may come in the form of time and resources, or may come from families themselves. The more pressure the social workers are under, the lower their expectations of parents are likely to be, and the more likely siblings would remain or return to be together.

The social workers did not provide any examples of occasions of siblings being separated on the basis of a single incident of sibling sexual behaviour. It was discussed in the previous chapter that requiring a second incident may relate to the social workers’ perspectives of children and of sibling relationships. In addition, a second incident might also be required to challenge the perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective. Parents may be given the benefit of the doubt on the basis of a first incident, especially if they reported it to the authorities.

As a final point, in the case discussed by Karen, where the behaviour was reported by another relative, there was no repeat of any sexual behaviour between the siblings following the police investigation as far as Karen was aware. Otherwise, of nine families where the social worker believed sibling sexual behaviour to have taken place, where the parent (7 cases) or foster carer (2 cases) reported the behaviour, wanted the children to remain living together or having unsupervised contact, and the decision was made to support the parent’s or foster carer’s wishes, in only one of those cases was there no further incident of concerning sexual behaviour between the

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siblings or another child in the family. A repeat of the sexual behaviour does not mean necessarily that the decision to keep siblings together was wrong, but the question is raised as to whether a parent being considered well-intentioned protective on the basis of reporting the behaviour and being willing to accept social work support may serve as a reliable indicator of their ability to protect their children from further sibling sexual behaviour.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

It emerged from my analysis of their accounts, that social workers maintained underlying perspectives of children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, and of parents as well-intentioned protective. These perspectives combined to form a practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’. Under conditions of uncertainty and limited policy guidance, this practice mindset strongly influenced the social workers’ decisions with respect to sibling contact and living arrangements. From my wider reading the concept of ‘frame’ may apply well to these ideas of ‘practice mindset’ and ‘underlying perspectives’, and therefore a useful term to deploy. My intention is not to invent or re-invent an elaborated theory of ‘frames’; however it may be useful to outline what I understand by the concept before discussing my findings in relation to the social workers’ decision making.

#### **8.1.1 Frame theory**

‘Frame’ is a term that has been used in a multiplicity of ways by a number of authors and theorists, with no single unified theory or definition of the concept (Firkins and Candlin, 2006). Some authors are said to define the concept “more carefully, less carefully or not at all” (Fiske and Taylor, 1991:174). Goffman (1974) invokes the term ‘frame’ both as noun and verb to refer to how situations or events are perceived and defined, those definitions influencing one’s involvement in and responses to the situations. Goffman (1974:39) gives an example of a woman examining a mirror on sale at an auction house. The woman looks closely at the frame of the mirror and then stands back to look at the mirror from a greater distance. Within the ‘auction house’ frame, observers of the scene might assume, even without their awareness of doing so, that the woman is checking the trueness of the mirror’s reflection. This would be in keeping with ‘auction house’ frame behaviour. However, when the woman then adjusts her hat, breaking with the ‘auction house’ frame, the observers may suddenly become aware of the mirror as a mirror, rather than just as a ‘mirror-

for-sale’. The observers had an internal cognitive template of expected auction house behaviour, an auction house frame, becoming consciously aware of this only when the behaviour did not fit their expectations. Goffman put it this way:

In sum, observers actively project their frames of reference into the world immediately around them, and one fails to see their so doing only because events ordinarily confirm these projections, causing the assumptions to disappear into the smooth flow of activity. (Goffman, 1974:39)

Dingwall et al. (1995) make use of Goffman’s (1974) analysis but also discuss how concepts as well as situations may be framed. They explicate the ‘bureaucratic frame’ (Strong, 1979), in which doctors in accident and emergency departments are strongly inclined to interpret injuries to children as accidental, based on an assumption that parents are “honest, competent and caring” (Dingwall et al., 1995:39). Interactions are interpreted in that light, with the consequence that evidence to the contrary may be ignored. They also discuss the idea that a family’s moral character can be framed. They found that if parents were regarded as co-operative, it was then hard for social workers and health visitors to interpret evidence in such a way as to discredit the moral character of the parents. Parental co-operation framed their moral character as honest and caring.

As one final example, Asquith (1980) contrasts different professionals’ “frames of relevance”, a term which is never clearly defined but which refers to the stock of knowledge, assumptions, theories, beliefs and values which inform professional judgements and decision making. For example, due to their different ‘frames of relevance’ a social worker might regard (frame) a criminal as a patient requiring treatment, whereas a lawyer might regard (frame) a criminal as a responsible law-breaker who ought to be punished (Asquith, 1980).

These examples illustrate the variety of different ways that the term ‘frame’ has been used. Casson (1983) identifies both contextual and conceptual framing in his review of the concept of ‘schema’, arguing that terms such as ‘frame’, ‘schema’, and ‘gestalt’, whilst all conceptualised slightly differently by different writers, share

many similarities and broadly refer to the same notion. In short, Casson (1983) refers to schemas, or ‘schemata’, as

conceptual abstractions that mediate between stimuli received  
by the sense organs and behavioural responses (Casson,  
1983:430).

In other words, the world is not perceived directly but through a mental filter, this filter comprising of cognitive templates made up of interpretations of prior experiences, concepts and constructed knowledge. How one person perceives a situation may differ from another’s perception depending upon their respective mental filters, their schemata, or ‘frames’.

My use of the term ‘frame’ is in keeping with this understanding of the concept of ‘schema’, and while drawing on the various constructions of the concept as illustrated above will most closely resemble Dingwall et al.’s (1995) use of the term. I prefer the term ‘frame’ to ‘schema’ because the term conjures a visual image which captures something of what I understand by the term. It is also useful in being deployable both as a noun and verb in a way that the term ‘schema’ cannot, and whilst my use of the term is broadly in keeping with the concept of ‘schema’, it differs in certain respects from some elaborations of schema theory (such as Casson, 1983; Fiske and Taylor, 1991), in that I do not see frames necessarily as operating autonomously, automatically and without awareness; rather they may also be conscious constructions of concepts which people actively attempt to maintain. This will become clearer as I exemplify my use of the term.

If frames act as something like mental filters through which we perceive and interpret the world, it follows that social workers will have their own frames through which they perceive and interpret their ‘case-worlds’. Social workers may be presented with a vast array of information and stimuli in relationship with the family, their home and community environment, other workers involved with the family, notes and reports in case files and so on. Social workers do not perceive this case-world directly and then apply a disinterested analysis to this ‘evidence’ to inform

their decision making. Rather, the information that social workers seek, perceive, and pay attention to, what counts as evidence in this case-world and how this evidence is interpreted, is influenced by the social workers’ frames. The case as such is socially constructed by the social worker through their frames and in relationship with the family and others in the case-world. In case-worlds involving sexual behaviour between siblings the social workers construct the case through the frames of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective.

The question arises as to whether ‘siblings as better together’ constitutes an overarching frame. The child and sibling relationships frames are logically connected: siblings are better together only if the children are siblings and the perpetrator is a child. The stronger the child and sibling relationships frames, the stronger the impetus to keep siblings together. However, while parents being framed as well-intentioned protective usually supports siblings being together, it does so only if this is what the parents want. They almost always do, so all three frames tend towards the same practice decision, but there was one exception. Strictly speaking, then, ‘siblings as better together’ is not itself a frame, but describes a particular set of frames. It is a ‘practice mindset’, a way of thinking about these cases, which allows decisions to be made even in the face of uncertainty, which necessarily encompasses the child, sibling relationships and parent frames, and which tends to support decisions to keep siblings together. Well-intentioned protective parents may override this decision, but not the mindset that siblings are better together.

### **8.1.2 The child, sibling relationships, and parent frames**

The social workers were clear that they would not allow an adult to continue living with a child, with whom they had engaged in sexual behaviour, whether proven or not. The behaviour would be identified as harmful and abusive. It is unlikely that parents, and especially fathers, would be granted contact with a child they had sexually abused. However, when the perpetrator was another child in the family, the decision making became far less straightforward. Perceiving the case-world through

the child frame, doubt may be cast on whether any harmful sexual behaviour took place; labelling the behaviour as abuse may be resisted; reasons may be sought which reduce the perpetrator’s culpability and highlight their vulnerability; and a conscious and self-reflexive effort may be made to continue to regard the perpetrator as a vulnerable child whose needs require to be met. These processes result from and serve to maintain the frame of the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others. Despite an instinctive response that the victim’s needs would be prioritised over those of the perpetrator, the child frame militates against any straightforward and unproblematic decision to remove the perpetrator child from the home, to stop sibling contact, or to consider sibling separation as a long-term solution. ‘Child’ for the social workers was a spectrum concept. The social workers’ prototype child was young, innocent, asexual, blameless and vulnerable, but the social workers’ overall child frame was much broader, and a child would not necessarily stop being considered as such immediately upon reaching the age of majority, if the social worker had a relationship with the child and continued to regard them as vulnerable. The child frame was stronger with respect to younger, more vulnerable children, children regarded as remorseful, and for social workers who had a relationship with the child.

The frame of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value added to the social workers’ difficulties in making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. Even if the sexual behaviour was regarded as abusive, the majority of the social workers were reluctant to consider the sibling relationship in those terms. Abusive sibling sexual behaviour did not define the sibling relationship as abusive. Framing sibling relationships as non-abusive encouraged social workers to focus on immediate physical and sexual safety to the preclusion of emotional safety, and meant that the relationship was seen as neither a cause nor a casualty of the sexual behaviour. The social workers therefore responded to the sexual behaviour in isolation of the relationship. The relationship being of intrinsic value, contact between the siblings was supported, the only exception being circumstances in which there was very strong evidence of the contact causing prolonged and high levels of distress.

While there was some evidence that social workers were reluctant to separate families (wanting to keep children with their parents, and in particular with their mothers), the social workers were especially reluctant to separate siblings. The sibling relationships frame was stronger with respect to siblings who lived and had grown up together, and for social workers who were acquainted with the children as siblings.

Parents who were ‘on board’, who were the kind of parents with whom social workers felt they could work, and who had a shared understanding of the problem, were framed as well-intentioned protective. Well-intentioned protective parents were regarded as wanting the best for their children, as wanting to try to protect their children from harm. Framing the parents in this way made it difficult for the social workers to question the parents’ ability to care for and protect their children. Allowances could be made for their breaking the rules, displaying behaviour which could cause or result in harm to the children, and further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour. The wishes of well-intentioned protective parents would be supported by the social workers, which usually meant the siblings being together. However, if the well-intentioned protective parenting role could be separated out, this would facilitate the siblings living separately. Once again this frame was stronger for the social workers who had a relationship with and liked the parents. The frame was vulnerable if the parents stopped engaging with social work, but could otherwise withstand many challenges. The expected level of the parents’ engagement would deepen over time. If a parent was unwilling to try to engage on a deeper level, a further incident of sibling sexual behaviour would be more likely to result in a child being removed from their care. However, if the social worker was under pressure, such as from the parents or from time or resource constraints, the expectations of parents could reduce.

Following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour coming to light, whether proven or not and irrespective of the parents’ qualities, the social workers said they would not allow siblings to continue living together if one of the siblings was an adult. The child frame needs to be operative. At least a second incident of sibling sexual



behaviour was required before social workers considered separating siblings if the siblings were children. Sibling children could continue living together, even when the behaviour was regarded as abusive, if the parent was judged to be well-intentioned protective. Sibling relationships are non-abusive and of intrinsic value, and unless forbidden by well-intentioned protective parents, siblings would be encouraged to maintain face-to-face contact almost no matter what had taken place between the siblings and however the qualities of the parents were judged. Taken together, these frames constitute the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’. Social workers perceived and interpreted their case-worlds through this practice mindset, influencing decision making which supported siblings living together, or maintaining direct face-to-face contact.

### **8.1.3 The context of relationships**

Before discussing this practice mindset in more depth, two general points may usefully be made. Firstly it is clear that the social workers’ frames are stronger in the context of relationships with the children and parents. Decisions are made in the context of these relationships, not on the basis of a disinterested analysis of evidence. The expectation that social workers form close working relationships with service users is embedded in social work practice and training. The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland states in its introduction that

social work has always had a strong ethical basis that emphasises the importance of building a positive, professional relationship with people who use services (Jamieson, 2003:18).

Trevithick (2000:77) argues that “[t]he relationship we build with service users is central to the social work task” and Coulshed and Orme (2006) similarly assert that

[t]he tasks that social workers perform, the understanding they bring to those tasks and the nature of the relationships they build with people in need remain vital whatever the arrangements for delivering services (Coulshed and Orme, 2006:1).

The central importance of relationships was clearly stated by one of the policy informants:

The key to it will be relationships and us making effective  
relationships with children and parents (Policy Informant 2).

It would not seem reasonable to expect social workers to remain uninfluenced by the relationships they form, and I do not wish to argue that making decisions from the perspective of having built relationships with service users is undesirable, any more than I would wish to argue that making decisions in the absence of a relationship with service users would be desirable. However, I do wish to argue that it would be extremely valuable to develop a reflexive awareness of how the mindset ‘siblings as better together’, strengthened as it is by the relationships with the family, might influence the decision making. Okitikpi (2011) comments that in the context of close relationships it may be understandable, albeit not acceptable, for social workers to over-identify with the children and families with whom they work. Similarly, O’Connor and Leonard’s (2014) study involving four focus groups with 28 qualified and unqualified social work practitioners found that the participants’ decisions were influenced by their emotions, and in particular that they were willing to ‘go the extra mile’ for service users that they liked. Munro (2008) recommends that intuitive skills need to be used more critically, and that important decisions such as whether or not to remove a child from their family need to be held to the highest standards. Analytic styles of decision making may be needed to override intuition (Gambrill, 2008). I will argue therefore that the influence of ‘siblings as better together’ may usefully be balanced by an assessment-based approach to decision making.

#### **8.1.4 Assessment-based decision making**

Secondly, and on this subject of assessment, while there was evidence of ‘siblings as better together’ being operative for all of the social workers involved in the study, there were some social workers whose accounts suggested a more assessment-based approach to their decision making. There was no absolutely clear pattern, but social workers with more specialised training and previous experience of cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour, most of whom being youth justice social

workers, articulated a more analytical and assessment-based approach, especially when there was more time to make decisions and in a context of greater certainty. That is to say, these social workers spoke about assessing the quality of the sibling relationship, the impact of the behaviour, and the risks of its recurrence, and indicated how these assessments and their weighing of a range of factors informed their decision making in a deliberate, reasoned and logical way (Hackett and Taylor, 2014).

Hackett and Taylor’s (2014) study found the reverse, namely that cases of a type more familiar to the social workers and where there were greater levels of environmental certainty elicited a more intuitive response. There may be several reasons for this discrepancy. In Hackett and Taylor’s (2014) study the decisions being considered concerned cases involving children in need of protection from adults. These cases are likely to be more familiar to social workers than those where a child in the family is the source of concern. Even the more experienced social workers in this current study did not consider themselves experts and may not have achieved a level of familiarity with cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings to feel able to make decisions intuitively and experientially. However, with the higher levels of training they identified, they may have an understanding of the considerations that can inform assessments. For social workers very unfamiliar with these types of cases, they may not know how to go about assessing the situation formally, and therefore fall back upon the kind of intuitive rationality that they have found helpful in cases where a child is at risk from adults. The limited assistance available to social workers when making decisions in these cases is contained within youth justice guidance, and the more experienced youth justice workers were also making decisions that afforded more time for reflective and analytic thinking. Children and Families social workers were more often in the position of having to make quick decisions immediately following the sexual behaviour becoming known.

I will concentrate in this discussion on the more intuitive rationality the social workers displayed, focusing on ‘siblings as better together’ and its influence upon decision making. I will consider how the child and sibling relationships frames made

it difficult for the social workers to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour, before exploring decision making with respect to separation, reunification, and then sibling contact. I will argue that in the context of uncertainty and limited policy guidance, ‘siblings as better together’ could be said to extend the ‘rule of optimism’ (Dingwall et al., 1983) in these cases. There is a danger of a focus on the victim child being lost.

## **8.2 Making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour**

When an incident of sibling sexual behaviour comes to the attention of a social worker, one of the early and ongoing challenges is to make sense of the behaviour. Interpreting the behaviour through the social workers’ practice mindset militates against construing the behaviour as abuse and making any straightforward decisions to separate the siblings.

### **8.2.1 The child frame**

The social workers’ child frame is broader and more inclusive than the binary constructions of childhood that seem to have prevailed in the sociological literature. Despite criticisms of some of his methods and particular conclusions, Ariès (1962) clearly and irreversibly established the idea of childhood as a social construct, denoting a social status which varies over time and across cultures (Jenks, 2005). Without wishing to rehearse a sociological history of childhood here, it seems apparent that there have been two dominant ways of framing the child, which Jenks (2005) terms the Dionysian child and the Apollonian child. The Dionysian child is one born with original sin, who has the potential for evil and requires strict discipline. The Apollonian child on the other hand requires nurturance and facilitation, being angelic and innocent. Their innocence requires protection (Brownlie, 2001). In today’s late-modern or post-modern times, however we might define the present, the child has not deconstructed into a plurality of identities (Jenks, 2005); rather it is argued that there is a frightened clinging to the notion of children as innocent, as symbols of hope, trust and love, the children themselves and this

notion of child requiring adult protection in order to preserve society itself (Gittins, 1998; Jenks, 2005).

The idea of abusing innocent children is therefore “powerfully moral” (Hacking, 1992:194). Gittins (1985; 1998) further argues that since at least the eighteenth century the primary distinction between childhood and adulthood is the experience of adult sexuality: childhood is a period of innocence, in particular of sexual innocence, and despite Freud children are typically regarded as asexual. By defining children as innocent and angelic, the need is created for devils (Gittins, 1998). This provides some contextual explanation for the way that child sexual abusers may often be regarded as “the supreme evil of our age” (Webster, 2005:39), as “evil monsters” and “beasts” (Furedi, 2013:2; McAlinden, 2014:187). Furthermore, in the absence of an appreciation of childhood as multi-dimensional, with its “darker more shadowy” sides (Gittins, 1998:xvi), Gittins (1998) argues that children who transgress the boundaries of innocent childhood might quickly be cast as the “dangerous ‘monster’ child” (Gittins, 1998:204). A child sexually abusing another child may be seen to be behaving in a way more in keeping with an evil adult monster and would certainly be at risk of being cast as a dangerous monster child, presenting a profound challenge to the innocent child frame.

In this context it seems understandable that the social workers’ prototype child would be young, innocent, asexual, blameless and vulnerable. This prototype closely resembles McAlinden’s (2014:185) “ideal victim”, and policy documents discussed earlier, such as the Guide to GIRFEC (The Scottish Government, 2012) and the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2014b), also framed children as vulnerable, as potential victims, dependent upon and at risk from adults.

However, in keeping with the principles of the Kilbrandon report, the policy documents also stressed that children who present risks to others should continue to be regarded as children with needs which require to be met. The social workers likewise did not frame the child in such binary terms as suggested by writers such as

Jenks (2005); rather ‘child’ was used as a spectrum concept extending up to and sometimes beyond the age of legal majority. Children were regarded as more or less child according to the degree to which they met the criteria of their prototype child. Sexual children were less ‘child’ than asexual children; responsible children were less ‘child’ than blameless children; older children were less ‘child’ than younger children. Perpetrators were less ‘child’ than victims, but remained children nonetheless.

Scott and Steinberg (2008) contend that society has vacillated between regarding adolescents as children and as adults. They argue that adolescents should be treated according to their particular developmental stage, being neither adults nor children but something in between. Piper (2000; 2001) and Shook (2013) similarly comment that youth justice policy has never unambiguously espoused the idea of the child as a vulnerable victim. Adolescent sexual behaviour may therefore pose less of a threat to the ideal of innocent childhood than sexual behaviour displayed by younger children. The social workers’ overall child frame extended to include children and adolescents seen as vulnerable, dependent upon and at risk from adults, as not intending sexual harm towards others. While broader and more inclusive than the innocent child frame, the social worker’s child frame would nonetheless conflict with the frame of sex abuser as evil adult monster.

### **8.2.2 The sibling relationships frame**

Edwards et al. (2006) observe that the subject of siblings has received very little attention from sociology, with most of the literature on siblings coming from psychology in relation to child development, or anthropology in relation to kinship networks. A sociology of siblinghood is underdeveloped. Little research was conducted on sibling relationships until the 1980s (Settlemyre, 2011; Caffaro, 2014). The subject barely features in any social work training (Edwards et al., 2006; Caffaro, 2014), leaving assumptions unexplored as to what constitutes a normal sibling relationship (Edwards et al., 2006). Where the subject has received most social work attention is in relation to the importance of maintaining sibling

relationships in the placement of siblings for fostering and adoption (Kosonen, 1996; Edwards et al., 2006). Herrick and Piccus (2005) and Wojciak et al. (2013) review this literature and draw attention to the many possible benefits of maintaining sibling ties, such as reducing grief and anxiety when entering care, fewer emotional and behavioural problems, placements being more settled, and children performing better at school. Sibling relationships may be the most significant relationships for children in foster care (Herrick and Piccus, 2005; Shlonsky et al., 2005; Wojciak et al., 2013). Where sibling relationships are discussed in social work circles, it is likely to be in relation to their value and importance.

While some research has found associations between negative sibling relationships and problems such as increased loneliness, depression and lower self-esteem (e.g. Stocker, 1994; Branje et al., 2004; Yu and Gamble, 2008; Gamble et al., 2011), most research, including from these authors, points to sibling relationships potentially being of lifelong value (Settlemyre, 2011). Sibling relationships are likely to be the longest-lasting of all relationships a person may experience, children typically spending more time with their siblings during childhood than anyone else, and learning a range of social skills from the relationship such as playing, sharing, teaching, and resolving conflict (Sanders, 2004; Edwards et al., 2006; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Sibling relationships may take on even greater importance and bring children closer together when exposed to abuse and neglect (Settlemyre, 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Edwards et al. (2006) summarise the range of possible kinds of sibling relationships, such as strong, weak, indifferent, loving, caring, hateful, and rivalrous, and conclude that even a fraught relationship with high levels of conflict may not require intervention from parents or professionals. Sibling relationships come in all sorts of different forms of normal. In this context it may be understandable that social workers would maintain a perspective of sibling relationships as intrinsically valuable.

In addition, Sanders (2004) suggests that constructions of sibling relationships tend to be polarised and simplified around four main archetypes: siblings as allies (e.g. Hansel and Gretel); siblings as rivals (e.g. Cain and Abel); siblings as different (e.g.

Cinderella); and siblings as all-sisters or all-brothers (e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*). However nurturing, warm and loving on the one hand, or rivalrous, competitive and even murderous on the other, there is no archetypal template of sibling relationships as abusive. Within the sibling sexual abuse literature most of the concern is with the background and family characteristics of the perpetrator rather than an exploration of the sibling relationship. The policy documents discussed earlier focus on parent-child relationships, and to the extent that they discuss children who present risks, it is mostly in the context of risks to the wider community rather than within the family and to siblings. It is unsurprising, therefore, that social workers would also frame sibling relationships as non-abusive. The frame of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value once again conflicts with the frame of sex abuser as evil adult monster.

### **8.2.3 Conflicting frames**

Sex abusers are evil adult monsters; children are vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others; and sibling relationships are non-abusive. A child behaving sexually in a way that is potentially harmful towards their sibling conflicts with the social workers’ frames, making it difficult for them to make sense of the children’s sibling sexual behaviour.

Professionals often find it difficult to disentangle normal from harmful sexual behaviour in children, even if those children are unrelated (Rayment and Owen, 1999; Vosmer et al., 2009). Some confusion was also evident in the policy guidance, in that the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2014b) clearly recommended that urgent action be taken in response to a single incident of sexual assault by an adult, while ‘GIRFEC for children who present risk’ (The Scottish Government, 2008), like Morrill (2014), suggested that sexual behaviours between children would only become harmful if repeated. Social workers requiring a second incident may reflect more widely held beliefs that single incidents of children’s sexual behaviour may not be harmful.



The social workers commented that the sexual behaviour taking place between siblings further confused the issue. While the social workers were all clear that any kind of sibling sexual behaviour would be inappropriate (even if developmentally normal and expected), they regarded the circumstances in which siblings are raised as making it more understandable for siblings to make mistakes. Johnson et al. (2009) report that family practices may indeed account for some variation in the sexual behaviours displayed between sibling children, and found wide disagreement among mental health and child welfare professionals over the boundaries of acceptable sibling intimacy. Caffaro (2014) comments that the possibility of normative sexual behaviour taking place between siblings has contributed to a myth that sibling sexual behaviour is mutual. Making sense of sexual behaviour between children seems to be difficult, and between siblings even more so.

The social workers nonetheless used a number of criteria in keeping with the literature (e.g. Calder, 1999; Araj, 2004) and policy guidance on differentiating normative from abusive sexual behaviour in order to try to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. According to the social workers’ accounts of the behaviours and the criteria they said they used, in most cases the sexual behaviours could accurately have been described as abusive. However, most of the social workers resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse. Framing the behaviour as ‘inappropriate’, ‘experimental’ or ‘sexualised’ avoided ascribing intention and served to maintain the child and sibling relationships frames, the term ‘sexualised’ in particular emphasising the child’s victim experiences and thereby enhancing their child status.

Rather than labelling the behaviour according to the characteristics of the behaviour, the social workers labelled the behaviour according to their relationship with the perpetrator and a moral judgement of the child’s character. In an American study of 44 special investigation reports of incidents involving sexual behaviour in young children in child care, Martin (2014) similarly found that professionals made sense of children’s sexual behaviour according to their own cultural frames rather than the characteristics of the behaviour. While the behaviour was the same, service providers who worked with both victim and perpetrator tended to construe it as misbehaviour,

as inappropriate; licensing consultants who investigated the behaviour construed it as a breach of the rules and a possible sign that the perpetrator had been sexually abused; the parents of the victim construed the behaviour as sexual abuse. In this current study, social workers allocated to work with the perpetrator tended to label the behaviour as inappropriate, experimental or sexualised, and more senior managers and social workers allocated to work only with the victim were more likely to label the behaviour as abuse.

Children who were older and perceived as unemotional and unremorseful presented less of a conflict with the frame of sex abuser as evil adult monster and were also more likely to have their behaviour described as abuse. Older children perceived as unemotional and unremorseful were more likely to be regarded as the kind of children who would sexually abuse others, the kind of children who would have the intention to harm. Drawing on the notion of ‘human kinds’ (Hacking, 1992; Berreby, 2005) discussed in the literature review, older unremorseful children could be seen as different from other children, a different kind of child altogether, and by thinking about older unremorseful children as a different kind of child, the social workers’ child frame could be endorsed. Indeed, unremorseful children might be re-categorized as ‘young people’ or ‘teenagers’. Rather than the limits of childhood being about sexuality as Gittins (1998) argues, for the social workers the limits seemed to be tested more by a lack of emotion and remorse.

For most of the social workers the older child’s lack of remorse did not have such catastrophic consequences that they were no longer considered to be a child at all. Both Gittins (1998) and Jenks (2005) discuss the murder of three year-old Jamie Bulger by two ten year-old boys in Merseyside in 1993, and suggest that the older boys’ behaviour so contravened society’s view of the child that many in society re-classified the boys as non-children, therefore reaffirming to themselves what it meant to be a child. Hacking (1991) comments, however, that professionals tend to be more lenient than the wider community. For the social workers, the unemotional, unremorseful child did not generally become Gittins’ (1998) monster child; rather they were considered as less of a child and their needs would be given lower priority

than the victim of the behaviour. As George (children and families social worker) said: “The perpetrator is a child, but the victim is the child”. The social workers regarded it as their professional responsibility to continue to work with the older unremorseful child in order to support their wider needs, making a conscious and self-reflexive effort to set aside any personal feelings of antipathy. A child who had sexually abused a sibling was still a child, albeit not the child.

These particular kinds of children aside, some social workers reinforced their child frame by making a conscious effort to avoid using language to describe the behaviour which might result in stigmatising the child. Some social workers were concerned that labelling the behaviour as abuse risked labelling the child as an abuser, and with younger or remorseful children they were reluctant to imply this degree of intention. Hacking (1991) argues that describing someone as a child abuser implies a moral condemnation, and several social workers explicitly attempted to avoid language which might imply that the child was “bad”.

The use of language in relation to children’s sexual behaviour continues to be debated in the literature. Johnson (1991) introduced a typology of behaviours for children under the age of 12, ranging from natural and healthy to sexually reactive, extensive mutual, and abusive. This typology was reproduced in some of the local risk management protocols. In Vosmer et al.’s (2009) study there was 88% agreement among professionals, however, that children under ten years old should not be described as sexual abusers. I do not mean to argue here that the social workers should have labelled the behaviour as abuse or that all of the behaviours the social workers described could accurately have been labelled as abuse. However, framing sexual behaviours as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘experimental’ when ‘abuse’ would be an accurate way to define the behaviour may risk understating the seriousness of the behaviour and its potential impact on the victim. The social workers used terms such as ‘inappropriate’ and ‘experimental’ to describe sexual behaviours between very young similar-age siblings which could be considered developmentally normal, harmless, and an opportunity for useful learning. Continuing to apply these terms in the context of sexual behaviour which has taken place between children with large

age and power imbalances may obfuscate the nature of the behaviour within the professional team and dilute the professional response. As discussed earlier, Hackett (2004; 2014) reflects on the variety of terminology that may be used to describe both the sexual behaviours that raise concern and the children who display the behaviours. Both Caffaro (2014) and Hackett (2004; 2014) suggest that ‘harmful sexual behaviours’ and ‘children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours’ may be useful umbrella terms which avoid labelling the child as an abuser while capturing something of the victim experience.

The social workers’ looking for reasons to try to explain the behaviour also served to mitigate the child’s “capacity-responsibility” (Dingwall et al., 1995:81), averting the ascription of intention and again serving to maintain the child frame by underlining the child’s victim experiences and their status as a child. In an American study of 300 undergraduate students’ attitudes towards juvenile female prostitutes, Menaker and Miller (2013) similarly found that the more the girls were considered as victims, the less culpable they were seen. There was consensus in the policy documents discussed that social workers should respond to children and adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviour as vulnerable children who are likely to have been victimised themselves. The literature similarly endorses the view that these children are victims as well as perpetrators; Kozłowska (2010:48) suggests that they be referred to as “victim-perpetrators”. The reasons social workers offered were consistent with some theories proposed to explain sibling sexual behaviour within the literature: the child having been sexually abused themselves (e.g. O’Brien, 1991; Burton et al., 1997); seeking comfort as a result of other abuse experiences (e.g. Bank and Kahn, 1982; Daie et al., 1989); poor sexual boundaries within the home (e.g. Smith and Israel, 1987); retribution against an abusive parent (e.g. Worling, 1995); and exploratory behaviour in the absence of the social skills and confidence to explore sexuality appropriately with same-age peers (e.g. Finkelhor, 1984; O’Brien, 1991). There is overwhelming support for the social workers’ position that perpetrators of sibling sexual behaviour be regarded as vulnerable children, whose needs require support.

It is notable, however, that family systems theories which included a consideration of the power dynamics of the sibling relationship (e.g. James and MacKinnon, 1990; Digiorio-Miller, 1998; Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005) were largely absent from the social workers’ accounts, with only three of the social workers appearing to consider the sibling relationship itself as a possible contributor to the sibling sexual behaviour. While the presence of power imbalances was often given as a criterion to differentiate normal from concerning sexual behaviour, it was very rarely considered that the sexual behaviour might be a manifestation of a sibling relationship based upon power and control (Bank and Kahn, 1982; Russell, 1986; Tapara, 2012). Instances of sibling sexual behaviour tended to be seen as isolated incidents, not indicative of an abusive sibling relationship. Any harm caused was not by intention, again serving to maintain the sibling relationships frame.

The operation of this frame is given further credence by the kinds of safety rules the social workers introduced if siblings remained living together or returned to live together at home. These rules included supervising the children, putting locks or alarms on doors, and upholding standards of privacy and dress, which are all supported by the guidance in the literature (e.g. Hargett, 1998; Calder, 2001; Hackett, 2001; Worling and Langton, 2012). However, these rules did not include any support for the sibling relationship, such as consideration of the respective siblings’ roles and responsibilities and the need to avoid the perpetrator assuming any positions of trust or authority in respect of their younger siblings (Worling and Langton, 2012). It is noteworthy that the policy documentation also omitted to discuss support for the sibling relationship.

It is not clear whether the child or sibling relationships frame was the more influential. There were only three examples of sexual behaviours being displayed towards children outside of the family, two of these also involving the sibling. Two of the social workers referred to these behaviours as “sexual assaults” and the other simply as a “second incident”. In two American studies, O’Brien (1991) and Latzman et al. (2011) argued that sexual behaviour between siblings was not taken as seriously as sexual behaviour between unrelated children. In O’Brien’s (1991) study

only 35% of those who abused siblings were referred to court in comparison to 75% who had abused in the community. Latzman et al. (2011) comment that the criminal justice system is reluctant to become involved in intra-familial matters. Rayment-McHugh and Nisbet (2003) similarly report that in Australia sibling offenders are less likely to be charged and sentenced than non-sibling offenders. A child not being referred to court may not necessarily indicate that his or her behaviour is not being taken seriously, and as noted earlier one of the policy informants commented that there may be a reluctance to ask a child to testify against a sibling. However, it does seem that siblings need to engage in more serious harmful sexual behaviours before the matter may be referred to court when compared with sexual behaviours which take place between unrelated children. This might indicate that the sibling relationships frame is the more influential in moderating the language that is brought to bear in describing sibling sexual behaviour. Whatever the answer to this question, it is the context of the behaviour taking place between siblings which means that the needs of the perpetrator and victim need to be weighed against each other and why making sense of the behaviour is particularly important.

### **8.3 Some reflections on age and gender**

From all of the above discussion it seems clear that when making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour the age of the perpetrator child and the respective ages of the perpetrator and victim are prominent in the social workers’ thinking. Explicit considerations of the gender of the sibling children, on the other hand, are striking by their absence. Of the 26 groupings of sibling sexual behaviour discussed by the social workers only three involved girls as the perpetrators. This reflects the extant research on sibling sexual abuse, whereby brothers are much more commonly identified than sisters as the perpetrators of sibling sexual behaviour regarded as abusive (Carlson et al., 2006; Griffie et al., 2014). Given the very small number of groupings involving sisters as perpetrators in this current study and the heterogeneous nature of the circumstances surrounding the behaviour, it is very difficult to make comparisons across the cases in terms of whether decision making was different according to the gender of the perpetrator. There is no evidence that it

was, and there did not appear to be any differences in decision making according to the gender of the victim. When the social workers were asked whether a change in the gender of the perpetrator would have made a difference to their decision making, the social workers either said that it would not, or hoped it would not, and so did not prove a useful line of inquiry. The social workers themselves made very few explicit comments with regards to the gender of the children involved, so the findings refer to children collectively rather than being able to draw discrete conclusions according to whether the perpetrator was a boy or a girl.

In that context, the age of the children was salient for the social workers in their decision making. When explaining how they formed the view that the sexual behaviour between the siblings was concerning, almost all of the social workers first cited the age difference between the siblings, albeit that a large age-gap did not determine the behaviour to be regarded as abusive. Where the age-gap was small it was much more difficult for the social workers to discern whether or not the behaviour was mutually initiated and the extent to which it should raise their concerns. Other than those examples where the behaviour was regarded as mutually initiated, in all of the sibling sexual behaviour groupings the social workers conferred greater responsibility for instigating or initiating the behaviour to the older sibling. After citing the difference in the siblings’ age, the social workers often mentioned their difference in size as marking out their behaviour as concerning. The gender of the siblings was not mentioned by any of the social workers as a factor they took into account. A good example is the case discussed by Gordon, involving sibling sexual behaviour regarded as mutually initiated. The brother and sister in this example were described as being the same age, of similar size and build, and having a similar level of need. The power dynamics within the sibling relationship were discussed insofar as they appeared to be evenly balanced, but with no comment upon the gender of the children.

The social workers did not label the behaviours of any of the children under 12 years old as abuse and were especially reluctant to label younger children as abusers. As a corollary they were also more reluctant to separate younger siblings from each other,

even in the context of behaviours regarded as persistent and premeditated. The older the child the less there was a threat to the ideal of innocent childhood, the less resistance there was to consider the behaviour as abusive and harmful, and the more the social workers had to make a deliberate and self-reflexive effort to continue to regard the perpetrator as a child with needs to be met.

Nonetheless, as long as the perpetrator continued to be regarded as a child the social workers remained cautious about separating that child from their siblings and from their family. Perpetrators did not necessarily cease being considered as children once they reached the age of 18 if the social worker knew them well and continued to view them as vulnerable. What was very clear was that if the perpetrator was regarded as an adult, usually because they had reached the age of 18, the decision making suddenly became very straightforward. Adults would be separated from their sibling victim even where there was dubiety over whether any sexual behaviour had in fact taken place. The needs of adult siblings did not require to be considered in any decision making regarding living and contact arrangements. That having been said, all of the examples the social workers gave of adult siblings being removed from the family involved brothers as perpetrators. The social workers gave no examples of adult sisters sexually abusing their younger siblings, so it is unclear whether the straight forward nature of decision making when siblings reach adulthood is most applicable to adult brothers.

There are some indications that this might be the case. While the social workers made very few explicit comments with regards to the gender of children, they were more open in expressing differences in their decision making according to the gender of adults. While there seemed to be no question of allowing fathers to have contact with children they were alleged to have sexually abused, mothers were not only allowed contact but continued to be considered as potential resident parents. While concerns about father-child relationships were expressed as worries about sexual abuse, concerns about mother-child relationships were often couched in terms of worries about ‘sexual boundaries’. Mothers’ male partners and friends tended to be judged according to whether they posed a risk, whether alarm bells were either



ringing or not ringing, whereas fathers’ female partners would be more likely to be considered in terms of whether they provided a protective factor. As Kate put it earlier, “there’s that kind of perception of, females are safe”.

There were also examples of the social workers displaying some gendered thinking regarding boys and girls. There were concerns expressed about all three of the sister-perpetrators in terms of their sexual vulnerability in the community, and all three were offered support services related to their perceived vulnerability rather than related to their harmful sexual behaviour. By contrast, brother-perpetrators were more often discussed in terms of the risks they may present to the community, and all but two of the brother-perpetrators were offered a service to address their harmful sexual behaviour. These differences in responses to boys and girls displaying harmful sexual behaviour have been noted previously (Robinson, 2005).

From the three examples the social workers gave of a sister being the perpetrator of sibling sexual behaviour there is no evidence of differences in the social workers’ decision making around living and contact arrangements according to the gender of the sibling perpetrator. The social workers themselves have not explicitly mentioned gender as part of their considerations in this regard. However, from the above discussion it would be surprising if the gender of the sibling did not in some way influence the social workers’ thinking. A larger study with more examples of sisters as perpetrators, or perhaps a study involving the factorial analysis of responses to vignettes, might help to tease out some of these issues further. It is nonetheless noteworthy that gender was not an explicit consideration for the social workers, and that the age of the children was such an influential factor.

## **8.4 Separation and reunification decision making**

The social workers’ child frame is broader and more inclusive than that said to prevail in the wider community. There are both conscious mechanisms and mechanisms out of the social workers’ awareness which serve to maintain the child and sibling relationship frames. These frames by themselves may not determine the decisions social workers make about sibling living arrangements, but influence the

behaviour to be construed in such a way as to understate the potential impact of the behaviour on the victim. A second incident is required before separation is considered, and the social workers are unable to make any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate siblings in the way that is possible if the perpetrator is an adult. The needs of the perpetrator child have to be taken into account.

With the notion of ‘child’ being for the social workers a spectrum concept, the perpetrator might be less of a child than the victim, implying that the victim’s needs ultimately would be prioritised. This was generally the social workers’ instinctive response, and being willing if necessary to prioritise the needs of the victim was one of the social workers’ expectations of a well-intentioned protective parent. However, in making a conscious and self-reflexive effort to consider the needs of the perpetrator as a child, and in understanding the perpetrator also to be a victim themselves, decision making remained finely balanced. The social workers were reluctant to make any decisions to separate siblings on the basis of a single incident and other than for concerns about immediate physical and sexual safety. ‘Emotional safety’ (Norrie, 1998; The Scottish Government, 2012) was rarely considered. A focus on physical and sexual safety was also found by Matthews et al. (1991) in their study of reunification of sexually abusive parents. In this sense the social workers’ concept of safety was more in keeping with child protection guidance than the Guide to Getting it Right for Every Child (The Scottish Government, 2012). Where immediate safety was a concern most of the social workers prioritised the needs of the victim of the sexual behaviour, but this was not universally the case.

The social workers’ considerations in this regard are reflected in the recent practice literature on sibling sexual behaviour, where the basis upon which decisions should be made regarding the removal of a child from the family home remains highly contested. As discussed in the literature review, some authors recommend, pending assessment, the cessation of all sibling contact with the needs of the victim being given clear priority (e.g. Costin et al., 2009; Ballantine, 2012; Tapara, 2012). Others are more equivocal in suggesting that each case needs to be assessed individually on

its own merits (e.g. Fahy, 2011; Kambouridis, 2012; Caffaro, 2014), and still others, such as Keane et al. (2013), argue that the victim and perpetrator are both children, whose needs should be considered equally; separation should be considered only where there are immediate safety concerns.

Sibling sexual behaviour clearly provides an arena for debate over the construction of the child, which child’s needs should be prioritised, who is more or less a child. The social workers’ position to remove a child from the family following sibling sexual behaviour only where there are concerns about immediate safety clearly meets with some support in the sibling incest literature. Where there are safety concerns most of the social workers would ultimately prioritise the needs of the victim by removing the perpetrator from the home. This position is supported by most of the literature, but the position of the few social workers to treat both victim and perpetrator as equally in need also meets with support.

#### **8.4.1 Focusing attention on the parents**

With immediate safety being the primary concern in making decisions about sibling living and contact arrangements, the social workers looked to the parents, or in some circumstances foster carers, to provide this level of safety. The social workers formed a judgement of the parents’ moral character as to whether they were well-intentioned protective, whether they were the kinds of parents who would want to try to provide safety for their children, based on the extent to which they could be regarded as ‘on board’.

There is some support within the policy documents for the social workers’ using the criteria for parents being ‘on board’ as some measure of safety within the home situation. The National Youth Justice Practice Guidance (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013) does not include any consideration of the impact of the sexual behaviour upon the victim, but suggests that the parents’ level of co-operation with services, the extent to which parents share the social worker’s concerns, and their ability to work alongside other agencies, are useful indicators of whether or not siblings can remain living together. Similarly, Morrison and Wilkinson’s (2002)

guidance on the initial assessment of parents includes items on the parents’ role in reporting the behaviour and cooperation with agencies. However, both sets of guidance recommend that the parents’ abilities to protect and to employ risk management strategies should also be taken into account. The social workers did not discuss assessing the parents’ protective abilities, and judged safety according to their relationship with the parents. Under pressure of time to make decisions about living arrangements immediately following the sibling sexual behaviour becoming known, whether parents were regarded as ‘on board’ and therefore well-intentioned protective was based largely upon whether the parents had reported the behaviour and were willing to accept help from social work. A number of commentators have similarly observed that social work judgements tend to rely on moral reasoning rather than objective assessment (e.g. Chu and Tsui, 2008; Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010; Crea, 2010; Keddell, 2011). Parton (1997; 1999) found in particular that amongst other factors mothers’ responses were sometimes more influential in social workers’ judgements as to whether a child was at risk than evidence of actual injury. Platt and Turney (2014) conclude that in a pressurised, uncertain and complex environment, there is considerable evidence of social workers using parental cooperation and engagement as a short-cut to dealing with complexity and as an aid to decision making.

If parents were regarded as ‘on board’ and therefore well-intentioned protective, their wishes regarding the living arrangements for their children were supported, whether that be the children remaining at home following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour or a child returning home after a period of separation. If the sibling sexual behaviour was labelled as abuse this did not override the wishes of the well-intentioned protective parent. Similar to the findings from Ward et al.’s (2012) study of safeguarding babies, parents were given another opportunity to demonstrate that they could ‘parent’. Ward et al. (2012) commented that the need to give parents another chance was an argument often put forward by social workers and could be a barrier to safeguarding. The social workers’ belief was that the perpetrators of the sibling sexual behaviour were likely to have suffered trauma and abuse themselves in

order to have displayed such behaviour. Parents engaging with services by reporting the behaviour and being willing to accept support made it difficult for the social workers to consider the parents as a possible source of this abuse, and promoted a framing of any failure to meet the children’s needs as unintentional. Parents reporting the behaviour resulted in the case being framed as one of parents needing support and advice, rather than as one of the family circumstances requiring investigation.

Expectations of the parents’ level of engagement deepened beyond the immediate decision making if siblings continued to live at home. However, allowances could be made for all sorts of breaches of the safety rules as long as the parents continued to engage with social work and continued to be regarded as ‘on board’. A judgement of the parents’ character as to whether they intended to try to protect their children was often more influential than their demonstrated ability to protect their children. This was particularly the case for social workers who had established a relationship with the parents, and who liked them. Ward et al. (2012) similarly found that there were no adverse consequences for parents who breached agreements. Both Firkins and Candlin (2006) and Munro (1999) discuss the danger of framing a case too early and then looking for evidence to fit this frame. While it was not clear that social workers looked for evidence to fit the frame, this current study clearly provides support for the idea of early framing and then evidence being interpreted to fit the frame.

If parents were not regarded as well-intentioned protective they were not seen as able to provide the necessary level of immediate safety to prevent further sexual behaviours and the social workers therefore recommended that the children needed to live separately and to stop unsupervised contact. Usually the child perpetrator was removed from the family home, but the victim and other children could remain living at home. The decision then arose as to whether the parents and siblings could have supervised contact, a question to which I will return shortly. Only where parents were themselves regarded as abusive were all of the children removed from their care. Parents were classified in three categories: well-intentioned protective; neither well-intentioned protective nor abusive; and abusive. Parents could be re-classified in both directions.

If the social worker’s initial judgement was that the parents were not well-intentioned protective, parents could come to be regarded as such by engaging meaningfully with social work in order to come to a shared understanding of the problem. Reunification could then be considered. Free of pressure, Talbot’s (2008) finding was supported that experienced social workers would expect parents to complete care plan objectives before considering reunification. However, as Farmer (2009) observes, reunification rarely takes place in the absence of pressure. The demands made of parents were significantly reduced if the social workers were under pressure to reunite the siblings either due to time, resources or from the parents themselves. There was an example of a child “graduating home” (Farmer, 1996:408), returning home when they came to an age when their placement ended, where the parents were thought to engage only superficially. In this case the social worker was concerned that there may have been a belief that the risks the child presented would simply have diminished with time, also echoing a tendency noted in Farmer’s (1996) study. There was also an example of parents through their own pressure managing to expedite a reunion between siblings, and of parents making their own decision for siblings to live together without the social worker’s permission. While the social worker had not at that stage recommended reunification they were reluctant to recommend separation, a phenomenon also found by Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008). There was very little evidence of a staged process of reunification being followed along the lines recommended in the practice literature (e.g. Hargett, 1998; Schladale, 2002; Thomas and Viar, 2005).

In this latter example it is significant that the social worker by that time had established a strong relationship with the parents, who were considered “very much on board”. The well-intentioned protective parent frame was more influential over decision making when there was an established relationship between the parents and social worker, and when the social worker was under pressure. As long as parents were ‘on board’, and therefore considered well-intentioned protective, allowances could be made for the parents demonstrating that they were not able to protect their

children, for acts of both commission and omission which caused harm to their children.

#### **8.4.2 Extending the rule of optimism**

The well-intentioned protective parent frame closely resembles Dingwall et al.’s (1995:39) assumption of the parent being “honest, competent and caring”, to which reference was made in the introduction to this chapter. Dingwall et al. (1983) proposed the operation of a ‘rule of optimism’: facing organizational resource pressures an underlying assumption of parents’ natural love for their children and a cultural relativism militated against social workers interpreting information as an indication of possible parental abuse, therefore helping to limit the number of referrals taken on as social work cases or as requiring compulsory intervention. Even superficial parental cooperation was enough to give credence to the assumption that parents were honest, competent and caring, and to make it difficult for social workers to perceive subsequent evidence to the contrary. Dingwall et al. (1995:68) clearly identified this rule as an “institutionalised preference for the most optimistic version of observable conduct”. Agencies with fewer resource pressures might be insulated from the rule.

Now more than thirty years on since the original publication of Dingwall et al.’s (1983) study, Robert Dingwall himself is concerned that ‘the rule of optimism’ has come to be used in such a way as to lose its organizational basis and its context of resource pressures, instead being ‘psychologised’ as a tendency of individuals and therefore a means to blame individual social workers (Dingwall, 2013). Ferguson (2013) has concluded from his research on social workers’ home visiting that far from being optimistic, social workers may come to feel helpless, overwhelmed by the conditions of the household, the presentation of the parents, and organizational time and resource constraints.

While its organisational basis has been somewhat lost, the operation of a ‘rule of optimism’ has been a consistent finding of serious case reviews ever since Blom-Cooper’s (1985) inquiry into the death of Jasmine Beckford (e.g. Sinclair and

Bullock, 2002; Ofsted, 2010; Brandon et al., 2012; Lock, 2013). Packman et al. (1986) found that parental cooperation rather than the social workers’ assessments of the quality of the parents’ caregiving differentiated those children who were admitted to care from those who were not. Several authors have found parental engagement with professionals to be taken as representative of the quality of care parents provide for their children (e.g. Farmer and Owen, 1995; LeBlanc et al., 2012). Farmer (1996) found that social workers tended to tolerate renewed abuse and neglect by parents if the family was generally co-operative, and Christiansen and Anderssen (2010) found that having developed a relationship with a parent, social workers had a tendency to want things to turn out well for them, therefore encouraging workers to be too optimistic.

The findings from this current study of an emphasis on parental engagement rather than an assessment of parents’ protective ability could also be taken as support for the operation of a rule of optimism, although social workers’ expectations of parents were generally more complex than a superficial level of cooperation. I have used ‘Parents as well-intentioned protective’ as an individual, though widely shared frame, but there is evidence that the frame had more purchase in situations where social workers were under pressure of time and resources.

Dingwall et al.’s (1995) rule of optimism and support for its operation (at least in its psychologised form) have derived from cases involving concerns about possible abuse by parents, but in the current study it is a child within the family who is regarded as the potential source of risk. Nonetheless, with a focus on immediate safety the parents continued to take most of the social workers’ attention. In judging the safety of the situation, the social workers rarely discussed an assessment of the risk of further sibling sexual behaviour posed by the perpetrator. There was a similar absence of assessment of the sibling relationship. Instead, whether the parents were regarded as ‘on board’ was taken as indicative of whether they could provide the necessary level of safety. It is possible that the judgement of the child’s character as being remorseful and emotional was taken as a proxy for risk assessment. If the child was remorseful, therefore not an abuser, the risks of recurrence could be thought to



be lower. There is some theoretical support for the idea that a child regretting their behaviour may be one factor which suggests a lowered level of risk (Ryan et al., 1996; Righthand and Welch, 2001), but it has no empirical support. It is also just one of 75 factors itemised in the AIM2 risk assessment tool (Print et al., 2012).

Moreover, framing the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, and framing sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, tended to support a benign interpretation of an incident of sibling sexual behaviour and therefore decision making in response which kept the siblings together. These frames tended to have the effect of understating the seriousness and potential harmfulness of the behaviour, overlooking the emotional impact of the behaviour on the victim, and seeing the behaviour in isolation of the sibling relationship. In cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ could be said to extend Dingwall et al.’s (1995) rule of optimism by including not only the parent frame (well-intentioned protective or, in Dingwall et al.’s terms, “honest, competent and caring”), but also the child and sibling relationship frames.

## **8.5 Contact decision making**

If it was decided that siblings could not live together due to reasons of safety, ‘siblings as better together’ in almost all circumstances led to a decision that the siblings should maintain direct face-to-face contact with each other. Only where siblings had not been living together at the time the sexual behaviour took place was supervised contact not initially considered, the sibling relationships frame being weaker in those circumstances.

Contrary to some authors’ conclusions that social workers underestimate the meaning of sibling relationships (e.g. Sinclair, 2005; Hindle, 2007), this current study would support Kosonen’s (1996) and Atwool’s (2013) findings that their importance is recognised, perhaps sometimes even over-rated. Macaskill’s (2002) findings that sibling sexual abuse did not contraindicate sibling contact are also corroborated. Macaskill (2002) was critical of the social workers discussed in her study for maintaining contact despite the distress of the children. In this current study

only where there was evidence of the contact causing considerable distress did the social workers (sometimes) decide to suspend contact, and in the first instance might choose to reduce frequency rather than stop contact altogether. The quality of the sibling relationships was not assessed in the way that many authors would advocate (e.g. Beckett, 2002; Lord and Borthwick, 2009; Caffaro, 2014); they were assumed to be of intrinsic value. In the event of social workers stopping contact between siblings they might have to withstand strong opposition from other professionals. The sibling relationships frame may not be confined to social workers.

## **8.6 Loss of focus on the victim child**

It was a striking feature of the majority of the social workers’ accounts that the victim child lacked any kind of prominence. One of the puzzles in this study is why the impact of the behaviour on the victim featured so rarely as part of the social workers’ considerations in their accounts of their decision making. It does not seem to be due to a stated belief that sibling sexual abuse has no significant impact. Indeed, many of the children were referred for therapeutic support following the sibling sexual behaviour.

One possibility is that a child protection orientation to practice prioritises immediate physical and sexual safety over emotional safety. Definitions of the ‘child protection’ and ‘child welfare’ orientations to practice both assume that the threats or risks to the children come from the parents and the care-giving environment they provide. Drawing on Gilbert (1997), Spratt (2001) defines a ‘child protection’ orientation as one where the social worker’s primary concern is to protect children from abuse, the source of the abuse usually being parents who are regarded as “morally flawed” (Spratt, 2001:934). The needs of the parents are secondary (Fargion, 2014). It would follow that the social worker-parent relationship would be likely to be adversarial, with the social worker taking an investigative approach to establish whether they “have a case” (Fargion, 2014:26). Any supports offered are likely to be of a therapeutic rather than a practical nature (Spratt, 2001). A ‘child welfare’ orientation, on the other hand, would be one where the social worker works more in partnership

with parents in order to assess the strengths and resources within the family as well as whether there are unmet needs, providing services and supports as necessary to build on strengths and to meet those needs (Spratt, 2001; Fargion, 2014).

In the discussion of the rule of optimism I argued that the parent remained the social workers’ focus of attention and that the parents’ reporting of the behaviour established the parent–social worker relationship as one of parents seeking support, making it difficult for the social workers to consider the parents as possible sources of abuse. This might suggest that the social worker is prompted to approach the case from a ‘child welfare’ rather than a ‘child protection’ perspective. However, I think this conclusion would be false. Fargion (2014) argues that a ‘child welfare’ orientation entails a different approach to social work practice in all situations, rather than different approaches being prompted by different case situations. Similarly, research by Spratt (2001) and Hayes and Spratt (2014) found that social workers continued to adopt a child protection approach to cases where parenting concerns were indicated irrespective of whether they labelled the referral of a case as one of child protection or child welfare. One would not therefore expect the orientation of the social worker to be influenced by the situation presented in the case.

Cases where the reason for referral is a risk presented by a child in the family present a rather different challenge from those cases where the risk is believed to come from a parent. However, working with the logic of the above definitions, the social workers’ focus on immediate safety and referrals being made for therapeutic rather than practical services would suggest a child protection orientation to their practice. The parent’s reporting the behaviour and being willing to accept support would suggest that they are not “morally flawed”, but their moral character would soon be questioned if they later failed to engage. A non-adversarial parent-social worker relationship which appears redolent of a child welfare approach might disguise what remained an underlying child protection orientation. If social workers continue to approach these sibling sexual behaviour cases in a similar way to their usual child protection cases, it could be concluded from the parent’s engagement that they do not themselves present a safety risk and that they could also provide adequate safety

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within the family. From a child protection orientation, the social workers could conclude that there are no child protection concerns. On that basis there would be no further need for social work involvement, and several social workers, such as Jenny and Lisa, gave examples of a case being closed once advice had been given following a single incident of sibling sexual behaviour if the behaviour was reported by the parents. Similarly, cases were also sometimes closed if the parent wanted the perpetrator to be removed from the family and it was thought that there was therefore no continuing safety risk. Farmer (1997) found similarly that in cases of sexual abuse by an adult, the case was closed once the alleged abuser was removed from the household. The child’s wider needs would be given little attention.

I did not ask the social workers whether they classed the cases they discussed as ‘child protection’ or ‘child welfare’ and I did not ask the social workers what their orientation to practice was. From the discussion above it would appear that most of the social workers adopted a child protection orientation, but there were potentially some exceptions. Emma, for example, very clearly identified strengths within the family and was explicit about supporting the parents to address their own needs rather than being solely focused on protecting the children from abuse. Barbara similarly worked in partnership with the mother and the children to consider their wider needs rather than focusing solely on the incidents of sibling sexual behaviour.

The preponderance of a child protection orientation, however, might help to explain why the focus remained so strongly on immediate physical safety rather than emotional safety. In a child protection paradigm children are passive victims, whose innocence is in need of protection. This implies children as dependent and lacking capacity (Shuker, 2013), as ignorant and disempowered (Gittins, 1998). Their voices are not heard, and do not require to be heard; they merely need to be protected. If the social workers were confident that the victim child was immediately safe on the basis that the parents were on board, there was no need to consider the emotional safety of the victim or to consult them about their views. Horwath (2011) similarly found that in cases of abuse by adults, among the barriers to seeing the victim child was a concern with risk management to the exclusion of a consideration of need. A focus

on physical safety to the exclusion of emotional safety has been observed by Shuker (2013) in the context of young people affected by sexual exploitation. Shuker (2013) argues that a child protection approach with a focus on physical safety has been taken to address the needs of these young people, and recommends instead that a child-centred approach which addresses physical, relational and psychological safety would be preferable, and indeed in the long-term would provide greater levels of physical safety.

Understanding that the social workers tended to adopt a child protection approach to these cases might therefore provide some insight into why the impact of the sexual behaviour was not considered as part of the social workers’ decision making. The social workers instead became focused on their relationships with the parents (and to an extent the perpetrator child), losing focus on the victim child in the same way that has been observed in the findings of many serious case reviews (e.g. Sinclair and Bullock, 2002; Brandon et al., 2012).

All that having been said, there were social workers who seemed to operate within a child protection paradigm who did seek to assess the impact of the sexual behaviour on the victim as part of their decision making considerations, and those who seemed to operate within a child welfare paradigm who did not. The practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ might provide an additional explanation. As I have argued, the child and sibling relationships frames militate against the sibling sexual behaviour being labelled as abuse and may understate the seriousness of the behaviour and its potential impact upon the victim. In addition, in the context of framing sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, the sexual behaviour would not be regarded as having its cause in the sibling relationship, as reflecting the quality of the sibling relationship, or as having consequences for its continuing quality. Any harm caused by the sexual behaviour would be seen to result from the incident, or even from a series of incidents treated in isolation, but it would not be anticipated that the victim could continue to be distressed by the ongoing presence of their sibling. As long as the behaviour stopped, the sibling relationship and its maintenance by direct face-to-face contact would be of value. Even if the

victim were distressed by the sibling’s presence, it could be interpreted that this would be due to a fear of further harmful behaviour rather than a fear of the sibling themselves. Once reassured that no further harmful sexual behaviour would be allowed to take place, it would be expected that the victim’s fear would subside and that the relationship would be of value to them. Sibling relationships are framed as non-abusive and of intrinsic value. If the social worker is satisfied due to parents being ‘on board’ or contact being supervised that there would be no further incidents, the emotional impact of the sexual behaviour would not therefore be relevant as part of the decision making.

This still does not quite explain why some social workers considered the emotional impact and others did not. The mindset ‘siblings as better together’ was shared by all of the social workers. However, those few social workers who did consider the potential emotional impact on the victim as part of their decision making seemed to adopt a more assessment-based approach to some if not all areas of their decision making. Most, but again not all, of these social workers were youth justice social workers with more advanced training in the area of children with harmful sexual behaviour. A more analytical and assessment-based approach helped to balance some of the influences of the social workers’ frames.

## **8.7 Some simple heuristics**

In the context of considerable uncertainty and limited policy guidance, all of the social workers were influenced, to greater and lesser degrees, by the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ in their decision making with respect to removal, contact and reunification. This mindset had a particularly strong influence when the social workers had little prior experience of working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, when the social worker had built a relationship with the perpetrator and parents, and when they were under pressure to make decisions. More analytical and assessment-based styles of reasoning were used by more experienced workers, most of whom were youth justice social workers, particularly when they had more time to consider their decisions.

Platt and Turney (2014) argue that when under pressure and faced with considerable complexity, social workers tend to reduce decision making processes to a limited set of manageable strategies. With a need to act swiftly and without the time for detailed assessment, in this current study the decisions regarding whether or not children could remain living together at home following an incident of sibling sexual behaviour coming to light were all made by children and families social workers. Their reasoning could generally be distilled down to a few key heuristics. If the parents reported the behaviour and were willing to accept social work support, they would be judged as well-intentioned protective and the case framed as one of parents needing support rather than a family requiring investigation. The wishes of the parents would be supported. If the incident was believed to be the first and only incident, the social worker would be likely to interpret the behaviour through their child and sibling relationships frames as non-abusive. It is unlikely that a single incident would be sufficient for the social worker to want to remove a vulnerable child who intends no sexual harm to others from their family, or to want to disrupt a non-abusive and valuable sibling relationship. A single incident would also be unlikely to challenge effectively the frame of parents as well-intentioned protective. If the perpetrator was young, or perceived as emotional and remorseful in response to the allegations being made, they would be unlikely to be regarded as an abuser and the behaviour would be unlikely to be regarded as abuse. This would tend to attenuate the perceived harmfulness of the behaviour as well as its perceived risk of recurrence, again reducing the need to separate the siblings.

There are several important things to note here. First, the type of behaviour itself does not determine how it is labelled, and whilst not irrelevant, does not feature as one of the key reported considerations as to whether or not the siblings can remain living together. Second, the emotional impact of the behaviour on the victim does not feature in the social workers’ accounts of their reasoning, and the victim’s views do not appear to be sought. Third, neither an assessment of the parents’ ability to protect nor an assessment of the risk of recurrence of sibling sexual behaviour are reported as influential over these decisions. Lastly, the quality of the sibling relationship does

not appear to inform the social workers in their decision making. As noted earlier, in eight of the nine families where children continued to live at home following the reporting of an incident of sibling sexual behaviour by the parent, there was a further incident of sexual behaviour which raised the social worker’s concerns. This reinforces the impression that cases may sometimes be framed too early.

## 8.8 Conclusions

Under conditions of considerable uncertainty, limited policy guidance, and little experience of working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour, social workers, like Lipsky’s (1980/2010) street-level bureaucrats, make decisions intuitively and in relationship with parents and children based upon moral reasoning and heuristics. I have argued that these intuitive decisions are underpinned by the social workers’ practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’. Suggestions for the provenance of this mindset have been provided from the sociology, psychology and social work literature. In keeping with frame and schema theory, social workers perceive and interpret their case-worlds through this mindset, and engage in mechanisms to maintain the mindset when met with potentially disconfirming evidence, such as harmful sibling sexual behaviour.

Social workers frame the child as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others, and sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value. Viewing the case-world through these frames, social workers may doubt the behaviour took place, look for reasons to explain the behaviour, and resist labelling the behaviour as abuse. Rather than being guided by a set of criteria against which the behaviour can be analysed, the social workers make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour by making a judgement as to whether the perpetrator is the kind of child who would abuse other children. Resisting the spectre of the adult sex abuser, they make a conscious and self-reflexive effort to avoid potentially stigmatising language and to maintain a perspective of the child as vulnerable with needs which require to be met.



The sibling relationships frame militates against a consideration that the sexual behaviour has its roots in or consequences for the quality of the sibling relationship. Incidents of sibling sexual behaviour are seen in isolation of the relationship, and decisions regarding contact and living arrangements are focused on concerns about immediate safety. The study raises the question as to what defines a relationship as abusive, if not repeated incidents of abusive behaviour. The potential emotional impact upon the victim of the sexual behaviour is rarely considered.

It may often be assumed that sexual abuse is extremely harmful, and for many of the social workers this was also their stated belief. Several of the social workers spoke about the high levels of anxiety that sexual abuse elicits. By bringing together and weighing against each other the needs of both the perpetrator and victim children, however, cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings challenge the assumption that sexual abuse is always extremely harmful. The decisions the social workers made in these cases would belie such a high level of anxiety. In the event, some of the social workers did not think that the behaviour had been particularly detrimental to the well-being of the victim, and the decisions that the social workers made suggest that when it comes to sibling relationships, sexual abuse is often not considered to be very harmful, and less harmful than the impact of separating the siblings.

With immediate safety being the primary consideration, the focus for the social workers becomes, like so many child protection cases, the parents. Social workers make a moral character judgement of the parents as to whether they are well-intentioned protective, based on the degree to which they are ‘on board’. Parental co-operation is possibly a very useful heuristic in cases where the concern is about parental abuse, and indeed The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2014b) specifies that a withdrawal of parental cooperation should indicate an increased level of risk. It is not so clear that it is such a useful heuristic in these cases where the source of concern is a child within the family. Allowances are made for well-intentioned protective parents who break the

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rules. Requiring a second incident maintains the child, sibling relationships and parent frames.

The practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ is highly influential over the social workers’ decision making and supports decisions which maintain the sibling relationship either by the siblings continuing to live together or by having direct face-to-face contact. It could be argued that in cases of sexual behaviour between siblings, the rule of optimism can be extended to include not only the parent frame, but also the child and sibling relationships frames. In the absence of the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ being balanced by an assessment-based approach to decision making, there is a danger that the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour on the victim is understated or overlooked, and that a focus on the victim child is lost.

## **Chapter 9: Strengths and limitations of the research**

### **9.1 Introduction**

Having presented and discussed my findings, in this short chapter I will present some of the strengths and limitations of the study before moving on to outline my conclusions and recommendations.

### **9.2 Limitations**

#### **9.2.1 Outcomes**

The research did not set out to evaluate the quality of the decision making in terms of whether the social workers’ decisions were right or wrong, good or bad. There was no intention to assess the outcomes of the decision making or to propose ways in which outcomes could be measured.

#### **9.2.2 Retrospective Interviews**

Within the stated aims of the study one of the limitations is that the data generated come entirely from social workers’ retrospective accounts of their decision making in the context of individual interviews. Memories may in the first place be false (Gambrill, 2008). Holloway and Jefferson (2000) observe that remembering is a process involving a constant tension between truthful acknowledgement and defensive distortions (Gadd, 2004), and Christiansen and Anderssen (2010) suggest that the controversial nature of a topic might encourage social workers to emphasise justifying factors and downplay others in order to legitimise their decisions. For these reasons Crandall et al. (2006) suggest that a case or incident should be chosen spontaneously at the time of the interview in order to avoid the potential simplifying and neatening of prior rehearsal. This was clearly not a possible method in this study. There is no straightforward and uncontested way to assess whether or not the social workers gave an accurate account of ‘what they were really thinking’ at the time the events took place.

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My experience, however, was that far from being defended, most of the social workers approached the interviews in a spirit of learning, wanting to learn from the interview personally, and wanting to provide honest and open responses in order to promote learning about the area of work more widely. Annette’s comment about her motivation for involvement in the study was typical:

And I thought, you know, well actually, this is about research, so you know the most important thing is that you say this is what I did, and this is why, and then, if the research shows that this worked or that worked or that something else would work you’re not going to find that out unless you get people being able to be honest about why decisions were made, or not made. (Annette)

This is not to say that the participants provided an entirely unfiltered account of their decision making. If their frames influenced their decision making at the time, it is likely that they have also influenced their re-telling of the story. This may have served to exaggerate their effect.

I argued earlier that it would be important to maintain a reflexive awareness of the dynamic relationship between researcher, researched, and research process, and that it would be helpful to provide a reflexive commentary within which to situate the findings. Gadd (2004) argues that reflexivity is best achieved after a period away from the research, when the researcher has relinquished some investment in the project. My comments need to be understood within the context of still being fully invested, and in time I may develop a different perspective.

One of the key issues in the research design and implementation was my prior experience of working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour. I might be considered an ‘expert’ by some, rather than being a ‘peer’. Nonetheless there were examples of all of the implications suggested by Platt (1981) and Coar and Sim (2006) of a peer relationship in the interviews.

Some of the participants experienced the interview as a test some of the time. This was influenced by a range of factors. Having known the participant prior to the research might exacerbate this dynamic, but could be mitigated by building or already having established a good level of rapport. How I phrased particular questions sometimes elicited a defensive response, and I learned to phrase my questions in a more approachable way after the first interview and found that sharing my own experiences and difficulties helped to alleviate the sense of the interview feeling like a test. I always reassured participants at the beginning of the interview and learned the value of repeating this reassurance. Rather than the peer dynamic always producing a response whereby the participants sought to legitimise their decisions (Christiansen and Anderssen, 2010), there were two participants who rather tended to be apologetic and may have understated the degree of rationale given to their decision making:

Sorry, I should be clear about these things. I know, I suppose, this case (laughs) you think, you think, what am I clear about in this case? And what am I not clear about? These are the wee bits I should be. I should be sharp on.

I find it quite, erm, I think it's that bit about seeking reassurance for what you've done. (Scott)

As Platt (1981) observes, there can be a tendency within peer interviews for the participant to offer discreditable stories in the hope of legitimation in return. I needed to be alert to the dynamics of Karpman's (1968) 'Drama Triangle', whereby someone taking the role of 'victim' can elicit a persecutory or rescuing response. I needed to avoid the temptation to 'rescue' and thereby fail to explore important details of the account, and to avoid becoming persecutory and thereby omit to offer reassurance when needed.

I had had previous professional involvement with only a minority of the participants, and far from being typified by defensiveness or apologetic understatement, the majority of the interviews benefited from the peer relationship in being open, honest and undefended. I was able to gain the respect and confidence of the participants by

virtue of my prior experience and was able to focus on the thinking processes rather than having to seek explanations for basic terminology (Coar and Sim, 2006):

I know I can say something to you and you’ll know what I mean, so you know I don’t feel like I need to, do you know there’s definitely a good side to me knowing that you’ve been there and you’ve done it, and you understand what I’m talking about, rather than someone who’s doing research perhaps in an area they’ve not worked in, so there’s definitely an upside. And I’m mentioning names, and you’re like I know them and I know what their job is, and I understand what they do. (Jenny)

My identities had contradictory influences on the research process, sometimes all within the same interview. Overall, however, the effect was to encourage very busy social workers to take the research seriously, to feel that they might benefit from participation, and to respond in an open, honest, thoughtful and meaningful way. I do not think I would have achieved as high a level of participation without the credibility of my prior experience.

### **9.2.3 Changes of social worker**

A complication with the study was that in 15 of the 26 groupings there had been a change of social worker since the very first incident of sibling sexual behaviour becoming known. I have focused on the decision making the participants discussed from their own experience, and have otherwise been careful to be clear about when the participants were talking about a decision made by a previous social worker. There are some inevitable occasions when I have offered my interpretation of a participant’s interpretation of a previous social worker’s decision, based on their discussions with that social worker or on case records.

### **9.2.4 Self-selected sample**

Rather than the participants and their cases being a random, representative, or theoretically derived sample, the participants are a self-selected group of volunteers, who chose which cases they wanted to discuss. None of the cases involved sexual behaviour judged to be un concerning and within developmental norms, and only

three of the cases involved a sister as the perpetrator. It was not always clear why the participants selected the particular cases, but mostly they said it was because it was the only one they had experienced, because it was memorable, interesting or difficult for them, or thought it would be of interest for the research. It was found that the parents’ reporting of the sexual behaviour and being willing to accept social work support was not a reliable indicator of the parents’ ability to prevent further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour. It is possible, however, that where there was just a single incident the social worker did not find the case memorable enough or interesting enough to consider volunteering to take part in the research, therefore affecting these findings.

There are no straightforward ways to surmount these limitations. Observation may have provided some insight into decision making contemporaneous with events and an interesting point of comparison, but would not have penetrated the thinking processes of the social workers from their perspective, therefore risking the privileging of the voice of the researcher over those of the participants. It would also have been very difficult to secure consent from the children and families involved. Case file analysis would similarly have required family consent, and would provide no greater claim to ‘truth’ of how social workers make decisions. We are left with the study having its limitations, but it also has considerable strengths.

### **9.3 Strengths**

I have offered two complementary sets of criteria (Yardley, 2000; Charmaz, 2006) for evaluating the quality of the research, which I will incorporate here under Charmaz’s standards of credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness.

The research is credible in that I bring considerable experience and sensitivity to the context in which these decisions are made, my methods having incorporated the anticipated effects of my identity. The methods have been explicated clearly and I have provided an open and transparent account of my position in relation to the study within which the findings can be situated. Sufficient data have been provided to support my findings and to allow the reader to reach their own interpretations.

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A sample of 21 social workers and 54 children is a good outcome for such a hard-to-reach group. While the sampling method was not theoretical, there are a sufficient number and variety of cases and participants to provide a rich source of material for comparative analysis. I have remained reflexive throughout the process of the research, the study’s limitations being openly acknowledged. The research is credible in being open to criticism.

While frame theory is not new, the research is original not only in that it illuminates social workers’ frames and their influence on decision making, but does so in an area that has not previously received attention. Most studies of social worker decision making have focussed on situations where a parent is the possible source of abuse. ‘Siblings as better together’ provides original insight into social workers’ thinking processes in cases where a child in the family is the source of possible risk. Most discussions of framing have concerned the framing of a situation, rather than of a concept. The way in which social workers frame children and sibling relationships has not previously been elucidated.

While the method of member-checking was not as I would have liked, participants have all responded positively to the findings saying that they resonate well with their experiences, especially the dilemmas and complexities around a child being a victim as well as an abuser, and the conscious effort to maintain a perspective of the perpetrator as a child. Delegates at the presentations I have given have said that they found the tripartite model of ‘siblings as better together’ very helpful, and that it has given them insight into decisions in other contexts, such as discrepant punitive and supportive responses to different children breaking rules in residential care.

The research has already had some impact on the participants. They have said that it was good to talk about the case, the interview generating fresh insights and challenging their assumptions that sibling sexual behaviour is always very harmful and that sibling contact is always valuable. Some participants felt reassured by the process and appreciated the chance to talk about their experiences.



Several participants reflected that the interview had provided a rare opportunity to reminisce about children and families, of whom they had been very fond.

In addition to these immediate benefits, the findings from the research point towards very clear, specific, and practical recommendations, which if followed could have a significant impact upon social workers’ and other professionals’ decision making and approach to these cases. I will summarise these recommendations in the final chapter. The research is therefore credible, original, resonant, and above all, useful.

## **9.4 My position**

As well as the research having some impact on the participants, it has also influenced my position on these cases. From the outset of the interviews I was struck by their uncertainty and complexity and soon realised that I did not have such a confident view of what ought to have been decided. Like the youth justice workers, the decisions I had been involved in making were primarily those which afforded more time for reflection, and which were set in the context of greater certainty of information.

As well as having more appreciation for the challenges social workers face, I am more aware of how my different working conditions and relationships with families have influenced my decision making. These working conditions supported an assessment-based approach to decision making. My role was to work primarily with the perpetrator and to some extent with the parents, and I was not acquainted with the children as siblings. The sibling relationships frame was not as influential over my perspective in these cases. I do not mean to suggest that I was therefore more objective; rather an absence of experience of the children as siblings meant that I may not have placed sufficient value on the sibling relationship.

My professional experience does not support frames of sibling relationships as non-abusive and children as intending no sexual harm to others, but on reflection I would say that I used to subscribe to these perspectives. It took me some time to realise that so many of the cases with which I worked involved siblings as victims. I had

regarded them as cases of children with harmful sexual behaviour, whose abuse happened to be of a sibling, and did not initially recognise the significance of the relationship. Tidefors et al. (2010) argue that the relative lack of research on sibling sexual abuse is due to the incest taboo. I would suggest, however, that it may be due to a more widely held frame of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value.

## 9.5 Conclusions

The findings of the research can be interpreted on two levels. It can be debated as to the extent to which they provide an accurate reflection of the social workers’ decision making at the time of the events. I have argued that they do, within the limitations I have outlined. A subtle realist ontology assumes that while it cannot be perceived directly, external reality provides a constraint upon our views of the world. The social workers’ accounts of the decisions they have made should therefore bear some relation to their thinking processes at the time of the decision making.

Regardless of concerns about ‘accuracy’, however, the interviews provide valuable insight into social workers’ thinking processes. Raising awareness of these thinking processes, bringing the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ to light, provides a very useful vehicle for reflection when making decisions in this area, and it is to the conclusions and recommendations that I will now turn.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusions and recommendations**

### **10.1 Introduction**

Several different strands of literature and professional experience combined to provide the rationale for this study. The motivation for the research originally came from my background of working with cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, where I found decision making around contact and reunification to be both difficult and contentious. The decisions social workers made in these cases were often puzzling. Concerns have previously been raised in the social work literature about the personal and idiosyncratic nature of social workers’ decision making, but so far research has concentrated on case characteristics rather than the thinking processes of social workers, and has focused on cases of abuse by a parent with very little attention paid to decision making in cases where a child is the source of abuse or risk within the family. This current study, which has sought to understand the thinking processes behind the decision making of social workers in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, addresses a significant gap in the extant literature. In addition, there has been a long-standing debate over the extent to which sexual behaviour between siblings may be harmful, and there are as yet no universally accepted criteria for differentiating harmless sibling sex play from harmful sibling sexual abuse. How social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and the harm it causes are of particular interest in light of their role in determining the extent to which the State should intervene in private and family life. Social workers may not encounter cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings very frequently, but are likely to do so at some stage. The decisions they make may have significant consequences for the children and families involved. Understanding how these decisions are made is therefore an important and valuable area of inquiry. This study has sought to provide insight into how social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and the harm it causes through an exploration of the social workers’ accounts of their decision making.

The research followed a grounded theory methodology and involved retrospective interviews with 21 social workers about decisions they had made regarding 54 children involved in sibling sexual behaviour within 21 families.

## 10.2 Summary of findings

The study found that within a context of considerable uncertainty and limited policy guidance, most social workers do not report making their decisions based on assessment or a disinterested analysis of evidence; rather they make their decisions to different degrees intuitively and in relationship with children and families. What is perceived as evidence within the case-world, how that evidence is interpreted, and the decisions that are therefore made, are strongly influenced by the social workers’ practice mindset ‘siblings as better together.’ This practice mindset comprises three frames: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective.

Social workers perceive and interpret their case-worlds through this mindset, and when confronted by evidence which has the potential to contradict its constituent frames, such as sexual behaviour between siblings or parents acting in ways which do not protect their children, they engage in mechanisms both consciously and outwith their awareness to maintain these frames. These mechanisms serve to maintain the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ and decision making which supports siblings continuing to live together, to have contact with each other, or to return to live together again.

The practice mindset was operative for all of the social workers involved in the study, but there is evidence that social workers with more specialised training and experience of cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour, most of whom were youth justice social workers, may make at least some decisions with a greater emphasis on analysis and assessment. According to most of the social workers’ accounts, these decisions are taken in the absence, or irrespective, of any assessment of the risks of future sibling sexual behaviour, the impact of the behaviour, the

quality of the sibling relationship, or the ability and capacity of the parents to protect the children. A ‘rule of optimism’ could be said to operate, which extends Dingwall et al.’s (1983) rule to include the child and sibling relationships frames. A focus on the victim child is often lost. While social workers have a stated belief that sibling sexual abuse may be extremely harmful, their accounts of their decisions suggest otherwise. If social workers contribute to the construction of sibling sexual behaviour as a form of abuse through the decisions they make regarding State intervention in the private lives of families, it appears that concerns about the widening of the definition of sibling sexual abuse may have been unfounded.

The policy and literature support the view that children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be regarded as vulnerable children whose needs require to be met. For the social workers, ‘child’ is a spectrum concept, with children being more ‘child’ the younger they are, the more vulnerable they are, the less culpable they are judged to be. The social workers’ child frame is more inclusive and less binary than more widely held constructions of children. Children are nonetheless not expected to be sexual abusers, and indeed the social workers resist thinking and talking about children in those terms, especially those children who are younger, those with whom the social worker has a relationship, and those who appear emotional and remorseful in response to the sexual behaviour coming to light. Whatever personal feelings of antipathy they may have, social workers see it as their professional responsibility to make a conscious and self-reflexive effort to continue to regard the perpetrator as a child, whose needs require to be met. As children become less ‘child’, so the mindset ‘siblings as better together’ loses its purchase.

The subject of sibling relationships receives very little attention in social work training, with most attention being paid to the benefits of maintaining sibling ties when children are placed in foster care or for adoption. There is no archetype for sibling relationships as abusive and social workers resist construing the relationship in those terms. Sibling relationships may entail a whole range of behaviours and dynamics, and short of being abusive, whatever their quality, they are perceived by the social workers to be of intrinsic value. The sibling relationships frame is

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particularly strong where siblings live and have grown up together, and where the social worker is acquainted with the children as siblings.

There are many examples in the literature of parental cooperation and engagement being used as an aid to decision making. Dingwall et al. (1995:39) found that parents were assumed to be “honest, competent and caring”, and in this current study, if parents reported the sibling sexual behaviour and were willing to accept social work support, they were framed as well-intentioned protective. Social workers supported the wishes of well-intentioned protective parents, which almost always meant siblings continuing to live together or to have contact with each other. Allowances could be made for parents breaking the rules, a lack of demonstrated ability to protect their children, and further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour, if they continued to be regarded as ‘on board’. The frame was stronger for social workers who liked and had a relationship with the parents, but was vulnerable if the parents ceased to engage with social work altogether.

The study has not sought to establish criteria for measuring the outcomes of the decisions and it is not therefore possible to say whether the decisions the social workers made are right or wrong, good or bad, or whether decisions made intuitively are any better or worse than decisions made with more emphasis on analysis and assessment. This is an area which would require further research. However, as Munro (2008) argues, such important decisions need to be held to the highest standards of accountability, and analytic and assessment-based styles of reasoning may be needed to override the biases of intuition (Gambrill, 2008). I suggest that raising reflexive awareness of the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ and its influence over social worker decision making, coupled with a more analytical and assessment-based approach, would not only offer a more accountable approach, but may also help to ensure that the needs of both the victim and perpetrator are more consistently represented in the social workers’ decision making.

## **10.3 Recommendations**

### **10.3.1 Maintaining the perspective of the perpetrator as a child**

All of the social workers regarded it as their professional responsibility to make a conscious and self-reflexive effort to maintain a perspective of the perpetrator as a child with needs which require to be met. This was more challenging with older and unremorseful children. The sibling incest literature, child welfare and youth justice policies, and the principles of the Children’s Hearing system which resulted from the report of the Kilbrandon Commission in 1964, all endorse the social workers’ position that the perpetrator should indeed be regarded as a child whose needs must be taken into account in any decision making, as would be the case for any other children. Any decisions to remove a child from their family or to stop contact should not on that basis be taken lightly or be regarded as straightforward and unproblematic. Extra support, such as from supervision, may assist the maintenance of this position with respect to older children who display little emotion and remorse, or with whom the social worker has no relationship.

### **10.3.2 Taking account of the impact on the victim**

While the social workers made such an effort to hold in mind the needs of the perpetrator, one of the striking features of the social workers’ accounts of their decision making is that the victims are largely absent. There are exceptions, of course, but descriptions of the victim as a child, as a person, are rarely given. In particular, while a concern about the harm the sibling sexual behaviour might cause to the victim is clearly implied, the impact upon the victim is rarely described or reported as being assessed. Whether ‘serious harm’ has been or is likely to be caused is the key legal test in terms of whether one child’s needs should take priority over another’s (Norrie, 1998), so an explicit consideration and assessment of the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour upon the victim is a significant omission. The explanations I have offered for the victim’s voice so often being absent are that a child protection orientation to practice encourages a narrow focus on protecting the

victim from immediate harm, and that the sibling relationships frame precludes a consideration of the emotional safety of the victim in the decision making.

In addition, the child and sibling relationships frames made it difficult for the social workers to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour, the social workers often resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse in order to preserve these frames. For some social workers this was a conscious decision to avoid language which might stigmatise the perpetrator as an abuser. However, using instead terms such as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘exploratory’, terms which are used to describe developmentally normal and harmless sibling sex play, might risk understating the potential harm caused by the sexual behaviour, and therefore underrepresent the needs of the victim. The social workers were less resistant to labelling the behaviour as abuse when referring to the victim, and there was some limited evidence that social workers and other professionals who did not have a relationship with the perpetrator might also be more inclined to label the behaviour as abuse.

A number of recommendations follow from this. Raising reflexive awareness of the child and sibling relationships frames would draw attention to the possibility for the potential harm of the sibling sexual behaviour to be understated in the way that it is labelled, and for the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour to be overlooked as one of the considerations in the decision making. It could be considered whether there might usefully be separate social workers allocated to the different siblings involved in the sibling sexual behaviour, such that the perpetrator and victim have their own social worker to represent their needs in the decision making. Having a social worker allocated specifically to work with the victim may help to bring their voice more audibly to the decision making.

Rather than labelling the behaviour according to a judgement of the perpetrator’s character, the behaviour could be labelled according to the characteristics of the behaviour. It would be helpful in this regard if policy could make clear that the criteria used to assess sexual behaviour between unrelated children do not apply in their entirety to siblings. I would further suggest that policy maintains the distinction



made by Johnson (2003) and Araj (2004) between harmless sex play, harmful but mutually initiated sexual behaviour, and harmful abusive sexual behaviour, so that the suggestion in Morrill (2014) and ‘GIRFEC for children who present risk’ (The Scottish Government, 2008) that repetition is needed in order for sibling sexual behaviour to be considered abusive could be corrected. There is such a wide variety and confusion of language used across the literature and different policies to describe children’s sexual behaviour, that it would be difficult to achieve consistency of terminology. If policies use different terms such as ‘inappropriate’, ‘problematic’, and ‘abusive’ it would be helpful to define them, and otherwise consideration could be given to the suggestion by Hackett (2004; 2014) and Caffaro (2014) of using the umbrella term ‘harmful sexual behaviour’.

Department of Health (1995) concluded with respect to abuse by a parent that it was essential to take account of the child’s perspective. As well as taking into account the victim’s views, some assessment of the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour could be undertaken. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer comprehensive practice guidance as to how best to conduct such an assessment, and there are reasons to doubt whether such an assessment would be either quick or straightforward. The victim may not present immediately with symptoms of trauma (Finkelhor and Berliner, 1995; Sheinberg and Fraenkel, 2001); they may not themselves recognise the impact of the behaviour (Barbaree and Langton, 2006); and the impact of the behaviour may be hard to disentangle from other difficulties in the child’s life (Finkelhor et al., 2007). Further research is required to develop our understanding of the impact of sibling sexual behaviour, particularly in non-clinical populations. When swift decisions are needed, inferences as to the likely or possible impact may therefore in the first instance need to be drawn from an understanding of the characteristics of the behaviour.

### **10.3.3 Assessing the quality of the sibling relationship**

Rather than making the assumption that the sibling relationship is non-abusive and of intrinsic value, it may be helpful to undertake an assessment of the quality and dynamics of the relationship, which includes hearing the views and perspectives of each child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). This may help to establish some of the context within which the sexual behaviour has taken place, the power dynamics surrounding the behaviour, and further inform assessment of its likely impact. As well as contributing to decisions about separation by helping to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour, assessing the quality of the sibling relationship may also help to inform decisions about whether contact should take place, in what form, and what kind of repair to the relationship may be necessary as part of a process of reconciliation and reunification. Several authors agree that sibling contact may be contraindicated where children have been traumatically abused within the family, by parents or by siblings (e.g. Head and Elgar, 1999; Howe and Steele, 2004). Beckett (2002) suggests that alternatives to direct face-to-face contact could usefully be considered.

Having recommended such an assessment, Mullender (1999) argues that assessing the quality of sibling relationships, of entering into the child’s world and understanding the meaning to the child of their sibling relationship, is extremely difficult. Caffaro (2014) adds that siblings may behave very differently in private from when being observed, and suggests that any assessment of a sibling relationship would need to involve interviewing the children separately in addition to observation. The importance of siblings to each other may change over time (Beckett, 2002; Macaskill, 2002), and any assessment would provide only a snapshot and require ongoing review (Lord and Borthwick, 2009). Most tools to aid the assessment of sibling relationships have been designed for use in non-abusive situations (e.g. Groza et al., 2003; Lord and Borthwick, 2008). The Sibling Abuse Interview (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 1998) may offer assistance, but its reliability and validity as an assessment tool has not been tested. How to assess the quality of

sibling relationships, especially in the context of abusive behaviour, is an area which would benefit from considerable further research.

#### **10.3.4 Assessing the protective ability and capacity of the parents**

Rather than assessing the parents’ ability or capacity to protect their children, the social workers instead made a judgement of the parents’ character in terms of whether they were well-intentioned protective, whether they were the kinds of parents who would try to keep their children safe, based on the extent to which they were ‘on board’. This study is limited by its scale and sample, but raises the question as to whether a parent engaging with services may serve as a reliable indicator of their ability to protect their children from sibling sexual behaviour. Further research may be helpful to ascertain whether and when a parent reporting the behaviour does act as a reliable indicator of the parent’s ability to protect, and what other indicators might also be helpful, particularly in those circumstances where decisions have to be made without the time to conduct a thorough assessment of parenting ability and capacity.

It may otherwise be helpful to supplement the social workers’ intuitive judgement of the parents’ character by undertaking an assessment of the parents’ protective ability and capacity, as suggested by the National Youth Justice Practice Guidance (Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013). A number of resources are available to guide and inform such an assessment (e.g. Calder, 2001; Morrison and Wilkinson, 2002; Donald and Jureidini, 2004; Smith, 2008).

Assessing the parents’ abilities and capacities would need to be understood within the context of the risks the child in the family may present. Risk assessment featured very rarely in the social workers’ accounts of their decision making. While the focus was on safety and preventing the recurrence of further sexual behaviour, a detailed understanding of the risks was not evident. A formulation approach to risk

assessment, drawing on a structured assessment tool such as AIM2 (Print et al., 2012), and supplemented by an assessment of the sibling relationship, has been recommended in these cases (Allardyce and Yates, 2013).

### **10.3.5 Some general points**

Maintaining a reflexive awareness of the possible influence of the social workers’ frames would be supported by having time to think and reflect individually as well as a model of supervision which goes beyond case management (Milner and O’Byrne, 2009). Undertaking assessments requires time and the ability to read through case files. Many of the social workers spoke about how busy they were, with high case loads and little time to read case files. There was evidence of the influence of reading case files on a social worker’s approach to the case. Social workers reported that information within case files was not always clearly recorded, with vague terms used to describe previous incidents of sexual behaviour which were later difficult to interpret. The social workers suggested that clear and detailed recording of sexual behaviours would be helpful, and given the likely complexity of these cases, that time be given not only to read through case materials, but to think and make sense of the case when working with the family.

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2014b) suggests that advice in cases involving children with harmful sexual behaviour be sought from youth justice social workers. The guidance that is most helpful to decision making within sibling cases is also contained within youth justice policy, yet the majority of the participants in this study, and the social workers most likely to have to make immediate decisions as to whether or not siblings can continue living together and having contact, are from children and families practice teams. There are a number of ways in which the existing guidance could be updated in order to provide more assistance to social workers in their decision making in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, which I will detail below. In particular, it may be helpful to draw attention to the potential for children to abuse their siblings as a child protection rather than merely a youth justice matter.

While the age of the children was salient for the social workers as an explicit influence upon their decision making, none of the social workers mentioned the gender of the siblings as one of their considerations in making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. Raising awareness of gender as an explicit consideration may be helpful so as to avoid gender influencing the social workers’ thinking in ways, of which they are unaware.

## **10.4 Summary of recommendations**

### **10.4.1 Practice**

In order to develop practice in this area of decision making, it is strongly recommended that awareness is raised of the practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ through training and guidance. Maintaining this reflexive awareness could be supported by supervision, and social workers being given sufficient time for reflective thinking. Clear and detailed records need to be kept of incidents involving sibling sexual behaviour, with social workers being given sufficient time to read and make sense of case files. Consideration may be given to allocating separate social workers to the perpetrator and victim. Decision making needs to be based on a more clearly accountable and assessment-based approach, which could usefully be supported by detailed guidance accessible to social workers in both youth justice and child protection settings.

### **10.4.2 Guidance**

In order to support social worker practice in this area it is recommended that both youth justice and child protection guidance be updated to highlight the possibility of harmful sexual behavior taking place between siblings. Specific guidance on decision making in this area could be included in local protocols for the risk management of children who display harmful sexual behaviour. Some of the local authorities do not have such protocols in place, something they may wish to reconsider. It would be helpful if such guidance could provide specific advice on differentiating between harmless sibling sex play, harmful but mutually initiated sibling sexual behaviour, and harmful abusive sibling sexual behaviour, which makes clear that repetition is

not required for the behaviour to constitute abuse, and that the criteria used for unrelated children cannot be applied in their entirety to siblings. Amongst other things, detailed guidance on decision making regarding separation, contact and reunification following sibling sexual behaviour becoming known should include recommendations to consider and assess the impact of the sibling sexual behaviour upon the victim; the victim’s views; the quality of the sibling relationship; the ability and capacity of the parents to protect their children; and the risk of future sibling sexual behaviour.

### **10.4.3 Research**

As far as I am aware, this current study is the first and only of its kind to investigate social worker decision making in cases where a child in the family is the source of potential risk. There is significant scope for further research to verify the findings and to investigate this area of decision making using different methods and from a range of different perspectives. The evidence from this study is that the social workers’ practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ has a powerful influence on their interpretation of a family’s situation and upon their decision making.

Understanding whether this mindset has resonance in other areas of social work would be valuable. It would also be highly beneficial to illuminate social workers’ frames in other areas of social work and their influence upon decision making.

Further research is required in order to establish an evidence-base for decision making in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. It would be particularly instructive to understand from the perspectives of the different family members their experiences of sibling sexual behaviour and the decisions made by social workers as a consequence. This could usefully include research on the impact of sibling sexual behaviour, particularly in non-clinical populations; the families’ experiences of living under the conditions of safety rules introduced following sibling sexual behaviour; and the parents’ and siblings’ responses to separation, contact and reunification. In order to aid assessment-based decision making, further research to understand the dynamics of sibling relationships and how to assess the

quality of sibling relationships where sibling sexual abuse has taken place would be highly valuable. Similarly, ascertaining whether and when parents reporting the sibling sexual behaviour to the authorities is a useful indicator of their protective ability, and otherwise what additional indicators would be more helpful, would aid decision making in situations where there is insufficient time to undertake a more thorough assessment of parenting capacity. Which of the child or sibling relationships frames is the more dominant in decision making also requires additional investigation.

## **10.5 Concluding comments**

The social workers said that had the perpetrator been an adult, there would have been no question of their being allowed to remain living with the child they had sexually abused. Sexual abuse is generally assumed to be extremely harmful with a high risk of recurrence. Cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings require the needs of both the victim and the perpetrator to be considered, to be weighed against each other, and so provide a useful vehicle for challenging the assumption that all sexual abuse is extremely harmful. These cases raise the question as to what, if not abusive behaviours, defines a relationship as abusive. They provide a valuable context in which to examine and challenge our expectations of what children are like, and what sibling relationships are like.

Five of the participants invoked the metaphor of piecing together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in building a picture of the case, in establishing what happened and then what should be done in response. Jigsaw puzzles usually come with a picture on the box: there is a true picture if only we can find all the pieces and fit them together properly. Yet social workers have no picture to refer to when making sense of their case-worlds; rather they construct their own picture in relationship with others and in accordance with their frames. Decisions are made on that basis. This research has illuminated the social workers’ practice mindset ‘siblings as better together’ and its constituent frames, and the ways in which it influences how social workers perceive and interpret case-worlds involving sexual behaviour between siblings.

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Raising social workers’ reflexive awareness of this mindset would significantly enhance their ability to make assessment-based and accountable decisions, which are of such consequence to the children and their families. If taken forward the findings and recommendations from this study can make a significant contribution to social workers’ reflexive ability to make decisions in this area of social work.



## **Appendix 1: Reflective notes taken immediately after Interview 1**

Interview was first thing at 9am. Interviewee 1 arrived a bit late and full of the cold so we didn’t get underway until 9.15. I was quite nervous with this being my first proper interview. Very little sleep last night so tired and having to work hard to be smiley and friendly. Interview in very large room so plenty of space to set up and get myself sorted before Interviewee 1 arrived.

Interviewee 1 to my mind is very experienced senior social worker and I know by reputation is well-respected with experience of work with children who display harmful sexual behaviour. Never had dealings with her directly, though. She knows my background but don’t know how that sits with her – she seemed a bit suspicious of the research on the phone? [...]Or maybe I’m just mis-reading, could just be asking lots of questions due to interest. Was this a peer interview? Is there some competition, some defensiveness – she’s a bit younger than me, maybe isn’t sure how I view her? And I’m also keen to be seen as competent, perhaps both a bit wary.

I spent quite some time prior to getting underway with the interview trying to be friendly and building rapport – having a couple of croissant / cake type things, but it was perhaps a bit awkward and clumsy that I didn’t have one myself – not a great deal of joining here. Next time maybe just need to eat one. Interviewee 1 full of the cold and feeling very busy with apparently a strict time limit, so I had a sense of needing to crack on a bit. Didn’t really establish rapport as well as I would have liked.

We seemed to spend ages at the beginning trying to establish the background to the case, the prior social work involvement. Interviewee 1 had come in with a huge social work file and had to spend some time leafing through it, looking for dates etc. I was worried that she would feel that I was making her feel that she wasn’t very familiar with the case, and also I wasn’t really sure how important it might be to get to some of this background information. Not helpful given possible dynamics and

tried to move things on - it is possible then that I let some things go that I might have wanted to pursue. It kind of felt initially like a case review. Need to get clearer on what I need to know, what I don't need to know, what is just about hearing their take on the case without worrying about accuracy.

There were lots of holes in the account, which I was aware of at the time. What were these children like? What was the nature of the neglect? What were the family relationships like? What were the sibling relationships like? No idea about the boy's brother and their relationship. Some hints but I didn't get the chance to explore this. How do we understand the context for the sexual behaviour taking place? Interesting that all these things are omitted from the account. I had intended to go back over some of these things but we ran out of time. Fortunately Interviewee 1 is willing for a second interview. Maybe can get on better terms next time [...] It was difficult just referring to relationships rather than pseudonyms and became quite confusing, especially as "Mum" wasn't the birth mum but a brand new mum who didn't live there anymore! Got quite confused at times.

Also, I was very conscious a lot of the time of trying to be the researcher rather than the practitioner, rather than being myself, and I think this may have got in the way a bit. The more chatty stuff at the end where I did put more of myself and my opinions into the interview seemed to have a much nicer feel to them and possibly revealed more interesting material. I thought in general that this interview warmed up as it went along, got more interesting and more rich.

It was really difficult at the same time not to make assumptions as someone who knows the field. I think this was also off-putting for Interviewee 1, especially when I asked how she came to the assessment that the behaviour was inappropriate – of course it was! Interviewee 1 couldn't understand why I was asking, I would know this stuff. Need to find a much better way to ask this question. I suppose it was a peer interview – came across as a test (Interviewee 1 said this explicitly) and so Interviewee 1 a bit defensive (See Coar and Sim 2006, Gadd 2004). A few times my own experience seemed to get in the way of the possible question and exploration,

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though Interviewee 1 said later that in some ways it was nice that I knew what and who she was talking about without the constant need for explanation, e.g. talking about the risk management case conference – I know what these are and what they’re like. Maybe another positive aspect of the peer interview.

In general I found it difficult as a consequence of all this to get beyond the flat telling of the story to the richer complexity of the decision making. Decision making hardly featured at all in the interview for a while. Will be useful to have follow-up interview to explore in more depth and when more time to do so.

Some initial thoughts: Decision making by Children and Families social worker not to intervene more to make sure things were safe after earlier incident? The case seemed to drift with little attention paid to the needs of the little sister. Interviewee 1’s role was to work with the boy – paid attention to sister when no one else did. Should there be two workers?? Interesting that Interviewee 1 still referred to him as a child. What does this mean? Interesting split in talking about “social work” meaning the Children and Families practice team. Could I speak with them about the case? Interesting stuff in terms of “she’s OK” (the sister). Look at impact and what the impact was / seen to be. Idea of taking it seriously vs. not wanting to make a fuss.



## **Appendix 2: Reflective notes taken immediately after Interview 5**

Arrived today having had decent night’s sleep (for a change!) and in good time. Getting used to going to [City] now. Was taken through to Interviewee 5’s office by another guy. Small poky office, no windows, difficult to know where to sit. Interviewee 5 was much older than I had expected and I was nervous to begin with – always intimidated initially by older men – [personal reflections on underlying reasons for this]. Feeling like a novice researcher rather than experienced social worker. Needed to be careful therefore to stay with my purpose and be willing to explore issues, not just accept first answer without deeper exploration. Felt awkward initially and it wasn’t so easy to set up the recorder etc. Also, I didn’t properly explain the interview and how I might structure it. Need to take my time and pay more attention to this in future – would help me in having shared understanding established so I don’t have to negotiate it later. Had some preliminary conversation, rapport building about his job, what he could expect, that sort of thing. Established that we had plenty of time for the interview. Helped me to settle down and nervousness wore off after a while, as it usually does. Frequent announcements over loud speakers – very interrupting – both acknowledged it, though, so we could manage it rather than pretending it didn’t happen and became quite a joining thing – we were both in it together trying to manage the interview. Eventually plucked up confidence to ask Interviewee 5 if it would be OK to switch off noisy computer. Use of power? Appropriate creation of more comfortable environment? The latter, I think – finding my feet. [...]

At various times throughout the interview I had a sense of Interviewee 5 being nervous or troubled about something. It was difficult to think why this might have been. He kept folding his arms across his chest, going a bit red, that sort of thing. Hinting at something unsaid. Later however, the nervousness perhaps became clear. Interviewee 5 mentioned a few times the issue of his feelings perhaps having been different had he met the wee girl – he would have had the feelings as a father. I came back to this later to see what he meant, not expecting any great disclosures but just

allowed Interviewee 5 to keep speaking without asking any more questions until he admitted that he had been holding something back and told me about it. Was this an inappropriate use of power, using clinical listening methods instrumentally to elicit personal information Interviewee 5 may not have wished to discuss? (See Kvale 2006, Fog 2004, Foucault 1976) Is this material appropriate for use in data analysis? [...] How did I feel during the disclosure? Worried about how he felt talking about it today, was he OK, was I doing his story justice, giving him enough time and support? I think he was worried that I was Ok hearing about it, asking me if I wanted a break. Chose to stay with it rather than take his cue to change the subject. Bit of a gamble, but felt ethical responsibility here to forget the interview and stay with the personal story (Maybe see Charmaz 2006 and Goodrum and Keys 2007). Chatted on about it for a bit. Fortunately he said that it had been helpful, actually, talking about it, it closed a door on something he hadn't realised was open. This was a relief for me as well! [...] It hadn't really been necessary for research purposes to hear the details, hope it was Ok for him. In the end I reflected, honestly, and congruently, that it was amazing (phenomenal) that he had managed to remain so supportive and non-judgemental towards the boy he had been speaking about (i.e. the case we had been discussing). That was probably the main thing I got from this interview – the effort made to support the boy as part of being professional, despite difficult personal feelings. Then tricky to know how to move on from there and I stumbled over my last few questions. It was hard to leave the story behind, but I was conscious of not wanting to pursue it unnecessarily. I was a bit unskilful, making the shift from research interviewer to something different. Maybe the fact that I had professional experience with the issue came over somehow – I seemed like someone who he could talk to about this kind of thing, wouldn't be knocked (too much) off balance, someone solid, capable, able to hear it. My professional experience, age, gender (being a dad?) facilitated something that may not otherwise have come out. Had a chat about confidentiality – whether it was OK to include this in transcript. Agreed we would discuss it again at a later date and I would also send him a copy of transcript for checking. Interview ended on good terms. [...]

## **Appendix 3: Schedule of interview questions**

- How would you describe this family, their circumstances, and the main issues they were faced with?
- How did the sexual behaviour come to light?
- How did you decide whether or not the sexual behaviour was OK?
- What did you consider needed to happen as a result of the sexual behaviour?
- How did the case proceed from here?
- Taking each of the decisions that you made in turn, what influenced you to take the decisions as you did?
- (If applicable) How did you manage the process of reunification?
- How do you feel now about the outcome of this case?
- How did you find working with this case?
- What do you think was the impact on the children involved
  - Of the sexual behaviour that took place between them?
  - Of the decisions that were taken?
- What advice would you give to any future social workers working with a case involving sexual behaviour between siblings?
- Is there anything that has occurred to you during this interview that has not occurred to you before?





## Appendix 4: Extended and annotated interview schedule with ideas for possible prompts

Question	Rationale
General phatic communication and rapport building	
Recap on purpose of the research - it's about trying to understand how social workers make decisions in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour; what informs and influences your decisions and a bit about your experience of dealing with these cases - how it feels to work with these kinds of cases. I understand how complicated and sometimes difficult these cases can be and what I'm interested to find out is how and on what basis these decisions are really made, rather than you trying to give me any kind of textbook answer for how the decisions were reached, whatever a textbook answer might be – and I don't think there is one. So, I'll want to explore in quite a bit of detail some of the decision making in this case that we're going to speak about.	Importance of rapport building and reassuring the respondent (Legard et al., 2003; Crandall et al., 2006)
Go over consent form and sign, information for participants, check OK to record interview, permission to withdraw or take a break, check time available.	Checking consent and going over information for participants as part of ethical process.
Go over format for interview – I'll start with some very brief questions about your role in the case, then explore the background to case, who was in the family and the main issues the family were faced with, then explore how the sexual behaviour came to light and trace through the process of the case from there, exploring the decisions that were made along the way. There may then be some more general questions at the end to reflect back on the case, and some demographics type questions so I can describe the sample of social workers who have been involved in the research. Is that OK?	Helping the social worker to settle in. Identity work – establishing the interviewer – respondent relationship, initial form of process consenting (Sinding and Aronson, 2003)

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Are there any questions that you would like to ask at this stage?	
What is your role and job title now? What was your role at the time of the case? Which agency / local authority were you working with at the time?	These questions are partly about warm-up and rapport building, acknowledging the professional identity of the person as they are now and the fact that they may have moved on since the time of the case they are going to discuss. This may also relate to the idea of expertise and experience and help to orientate the interviewee back to the time of the case they are going to speak about
I know that you’ve sent me some information already about the case we’re going to discuss today, but I would really like to understand in your own words how you would describe this case. So, thinking back to the particular case you were involved with,  <b>How would you describe this family, their circumstances, and the main issues they were faced with?</b> Which of these issues was of most concern to you? Why was this?	This again helps to orientate the social worker back into the case, to allow them to give an overview. It is acts as a useful warm-up question (Woodcock, 2003).  Hopefully, most questions could lead naturally on from this one. This question also relates to the question of the harm of the sexual behaviour, and how it may sit within the context of other forms of harm, the context of polyvictimisation within which sexual abuse may often take place.
<i>For cases where there has been longstanding social work involvement before the sexual behaviour came to light:</i>  How did social work first become involved in this case? What was the initial reason for involvement? Was there any work done with the family prior to your involvement? Which agencies were involved? What was the purpose of this? At what point was the case allocated to you? What were your aims in working with the family?	These questions are to allow the context of the social worker’s involvement to be established and to establish the “beginning” of the case (Crandall et al., 2006)
<i>For all cases:</i>  <b>How did the sexual behaviour come to light?</b>	These questions are to begin to elicit the story of how the sexual behaviour came to light and how

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<p>Who did the child disclose to? Why then? What happened next? How did it come to your attention? OR, Whom did the parent tell? What happened next? How did it come to your attention?</p> <p>What was the nature of the sexual behaviour between the siblings? How would you describe it? [If necessary I could offer some prompts here – There are lots of phrases that people use to describe sexual behaviour, such as: consensual, mutual, abusive, coercive, inappropriate, experimental, exploitative, harmful, criminal, problematic... How would you describe it?]</p> <p>What actually happened? On how many occasions? As far as you know, how long had the sexual behaviour been going on for? Where did this information come from?</p>	<p>the social worker started to make sense of it.</p>
<p><b>How did you decide whether or not the sexual behaviour was OK?</b></p> <p>What were the considerations that you took into account? How easy or difficult was it to make this assessment? What was it that informed your view? What would have needed to be different for you to describe the behaviour as (abusive, experimental, inappropriate, playful etc.)?</p>	<p>[I needed to re-work some of these questions after some experience of social workers not understanding why I was asking. Instead I suggested that there is some confusion in the literature about how to describe sexual behaviour between siblings and the criteria that are used for differentiating between normal and OK behaviour, and behaviour that raises concerns, therefore it would be interesting to know from the social worker’s point of view]</p>
<p><b>What did you consider needed to happen as a result of the sexual behaviour?</b></p> <p>What were your goals (short-term and longer-term) in working with this case at the time? What options did you consider? Did you imagine the possible consequences of this action? Who was involved in making these decisions? Thinking back to what you knew at the time, what was the basis upon which these decisions were made? Were there any areas of disagreement or difficulty in making these decisions? What were</p>	<p>These questions are drawn from Crandall et al. (2006) in deepening the understanding of the decision making. These questions may get to the subject of harm – depending on the decisions made and reasons for them.</p>

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the dilemmas? What was your view? How did you feel about the decisions that were made? Was there anything that particularly influenced these decisions being made?	
What do you think would need to have been different in order for you to have decided that the children could remain living together / could maintain contact? Do you have any examples of other cases when this has happened? How were these cases different from this one?	Again these questions are drawn from Crandall et al. (2006) as a way to deepen an understanding of the thinking process in the decision making.
<b>How did the case proceed from here?</b>	
<b>Taking each of the decisions that you made in turn, what influenced you to take the decisions as you did?</b>	Similar sets of questions to those asked above could be used to explore any or all the subsequent decisions made in the case.
<b>How did you manage the process of reunification?</b>  What were the agreements that you reached about how the siblings should and should not behave towards each other from here on? Were there any ways of relating that you thought would be unacceptable? Is there anything that would cause you to say that the family should no longer live together or have contact? How did you agree these conditions with the family?	If relevant, these questions can be asked. Again these questions relate to the subject of harm – depending on what harm the social worker thinks the sexual behaviour may have caused may influence what and how the social worker considers needs to be repaired.
<b>How do you feel now about the outcome of this case?</b> What is it that gives you confidence that there will be no further concerns about sexual behaviour between these siblings? Was there any disagreement amongst the professionals over this? What influenced your view? Thinking back over the case as a whole, what do you think was most influential in determining the decisions that were made? <b>How did you find working with this case?</b> How might it compare to working with any of your other cases?	These ending questions adapted from Charmaz (2006)

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<p><b>What do you think was the impact on the children involved of the sexual behaviour that took place between them?</b></p> <p><b>of the decisions you took?</b></p>	<p>These questions could be asked if the subject of harm has not come up earlier in the interview</p>
<p><b>What advice would you give to any future social workers working with a case involving sexual behaviour between siblings?</b></p> <p><b>Is there anything that has occurred to you during this interview that has not occurred to you before?</b></p> <p>Is there anything else about this case or working in this area that you would like to say? Or anything that you would like to ask me? Go over next steps, complete demographics questionnaire, ask permission to contact again if necessary, will keep in touch with progress of research, thank for time etc.</p>	<p>Ending questions again adapted from Charmaz (2006) and designed to allow the interviewee to offer some further reflections on the subject.</p>









## Appendix 6: Follow-up recruitment e-mail

We have been approached by Peter Yates, formerly of [a specialist service working with children who display harmful sexual behaviour], and currently a doctoral student at Edinburgh University, who is undertaking research regarding social worker decision making in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings. Peter would like to interview social workers who have had experience of working with such cases, and is particularly keen to explore decisions around separation, contact and reunification.

You may remember previous correspondence related to this research. Some [City] social workers have already taken part, but the research is ongoing and I would be very keen for [City] to be more strongly represented. I see the research as being very valuable and it will help further our own understanding of this challenging area of practice.

Can I therefore ask that [Practice Team Managers] forward to workers for them to consider participating in the study.

Peter would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with practice teams to explain the research and answer any questions you may have. Social workers may also contact Peter directly if they think they could help with the research. You can contact Peter at [peter.yates@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peter.yates@ed.ac.uk), and you can also look at the research website for some further information at [http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/phd\\_student\\_profiles/peter\\_yates](http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/phd_student_profiles/peter_yates)

Thank you very much.



## Appendix 7: Demographic characteristics of sample

Demographic characteristics of participants comparing with social workers within the wider Scottish local authority workforce as of 2009, by percentage

Sex	Study Participants	Scottish Workforce
Female	76	78
Male	24	22

Ethnicity	Study participants	Scottish Workforce
White	100	77
Minority	0	2
Unknown / Not disclosed	0	21

Age	Study participants	Scottish Workforce
20-29	14	9
30-39	24	22
40-49	38	31
50 and over	24	37

Source: Statistics publication notice: Health and care services: Staff of Scottish local authority social work services 2009 (The Scottish Government, 2010) Retrieved 11<sup>th</sup> November 2014 from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/07/01092227/0>



## Appendix 8: Profile summary of study participants

Pseudonym of social worker	Youth Justice / Children and Families (YJ / C+F)	Age	Number of years qualified	Number of previous cases involving children who display harmful sexual behaviour	Number of previous cases involving sibling sexual behaviour	Relevant training received (days)	Allocated to Perpetrator (P), Victim (V), Both, or Mutual (M) <sup>4</sup>
James	YJ	45-9	9	8+	8+	7	P
Emma	C+F	35-9	7	8+	0	4	Both
Jenny	YJ	30-4	9	8+	3	8	P
Annette	C+F	45-9	7	8+	2	4	Both
Fiona	C+F	55-9	27	8+	4	0	Both
Ruth	C+F	45-9					Both
Lisa	C+F	30-4	1	2	0	0	Both / V
Laura	C+F	25-9	5	0	0	4	P
Brian	C+F	45-9	3	8+	5	0	Both
Angela	C+F	25-9	1	1	1	0	Both
Scott	C+F	25-9	6	1	1	0.5	Both
Mary	YJ	45-9	13	8+	4	30+	P
Kate	C+F	45-9	8	5	1	3	V
Gordon	C+F	55-9	9	8+	5	4	M
George	C+F	55-9	16	4	0	8	P
Penny	C+F	50-4	9	4	1	4	Both
Sharon	C+F	50-4	2	0	0	0	Both
Melanie	C+F	40-4	9	8+	8+	8	M / Both
Barbara	C+F	45-9	9	5	0	5	Both
Karen	C+F	35-9	10	5	1	2	V
Liz	C+F	35-9	8	0	0	5	Both

<sup>4</sup> Where social workers have discussed more than one case, the table indicates if their allocation has been different across the different cases. James, for example, discussed more than one case but was allocated only to the perpetrator in each. Lisa spoke about two cases, in one case allocated to work only with the victim, and in the other to work with all of the children in the family. Where the social worker did not identify either child in the role of victim or perpetrator (i.e. the behaviour was regarded as mutually initiated), the social worker worked with both children involved.



## Appendix 9: Summary Information about the sibling sexual behaviour groupings discussed by the social workers

Pseudonym of social worker	Sex (M/F) and Age of perpetrator (Mutual)	Sex (M/F) and Age of victim(s) (Mutual)	Full or half siblings	Examples of Some Behaviours Involved	Was perpetrator charged with an offence?
James	M13	F8, F6	Half	Touching genitals, Attempted penetration	Yes
James	M12	M11	Full	Anal sex	No
James	M15	F1	Half	Touching genitals	No
James	M15	M3	Half	Touching genitals	No
Emma	(M8)	(M7)	Full	Attempted anal sex	No
Emma	M9	M6	Full	Oral sex	No
Emma	M9	M5	Full	Oral sex	No
Jenny	M14	F9	Half	Digital penetration, Masturbation	Yes
Annette	M15	F10	Full	Digital penetration	Yes
Fiona and Ruth	M12	M7	Half	Anal rape	Yes
Lisa	M15	M10	Full	Anal rape	Yes
Lisa	M10	M7, F5	Full	Digital penetration	No
Laura	M14	M12	Full	Masturbation	Yes
Brian and Angela	M14	F5	Half	Masturbation	Yes
Scott	M13	M6	Half	Anal rape	Yes
Mary	M12	F4	Half	Oral sex	Yes
Kate	M7	F5	Full	Touching genitals, Oral sex	No
Gordon	(M12)	(F12)	Full	Unknown	No
George	M15	F7	Half	Touching genitals, Digital penetration, Simulating sex	Yes
Penny and Sharon	F7	F6, F3, M1	Full	Touching genitals, Masturbation, Oral sex	No
Melanie	(F5)	(F4)	Full	Touching genitals	No
Melanie	M10	F2	Full	Penetration, Touching genitals	No
Barbara	M7	F4	Full	Touching genitals	No
Barbara	F10	M8 M6	Full / half	Masturbation, Simulating sex	No
Karen	M12	M7	Half	Anal rape	No
Liz	F14	F12, F8, M6	Full	Penetration with objects	Yes

Appendix 9: Summary information about the groupings discussed by the social workers





## Appendix 10: Transcription glossary

Having initially based the transcription symbols on the glossary contained in ten Have (1999), I have tried to keep technical symbols to a minimum in order to make the extracts easy to read.

[words]	Square brackets indicate words inserted to clarify the meaning of an extract when it is quoted out of context or to indicate words inserted to preserve anonymity
=	Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate no ‘gap’ between the two lines (known as ‘latching’)
-	A dash indicates a cut-off
,	A comma indicates a very short pause, or sometimes used in order to aid clarity to the intended meaning of the text, used here to facilitate the reading of the extracts
.	A full stop indicates a slightly longer pause, again used here to facilitate reading of the extracts
(3 seconds)	(Time period in brackets) indicates a long pause, measured to the nearest second
...	Three full stops indicate some speech omitted from the extract, either because the information might identify the family, or to skip extraneous material
	Where an extract is divided into separate paragraphs, it indicates that the speech is separated by some longer material
£	Pound signs surrounding a phrase indicate that it is spoken with a laughing voice
!	An exclamation mark indicates an exclamation
?	A question mark indicates a phrase with rising intonation where a question is suggested
(Laughs)	Parentheses contain transcriber’s descriptions



## **Appendix 11: Memo - Thoughts on coding interview 1**

Coding interview 1. Much, much harder to code than I had expected. Difficulty finding gerunds and finding ways to summarise and capture the meaning of the data. Also really hard not to impose my own interpretation and judgement – such as talking about little response to first sexual incident, thinking that perhaps victim’s needs were not adequately addressed. Also quite hard to tie things together – to code on a more general level that will work for other interviews and cases, rather than coding for this particular case. Difficult not to think of tying my conclusions to the story of the case. How will this be possible? I’m also aware of making judgments - confusion over the case history, describing it as stable but then expounding litany of trauma and instability. This seems to be my take on things rather than necessarily seeing the world from the perspective of the participant, what their problems and issues are.

Overall, so far, I have a sense that there is a lot of uncertainty around sexual behaviour, what really happened, and a sense of a lack of comprehensive recording / investigation. Sporadic Children and Families involvement and therefore the needs of the ‘victim’ potentially being lost. Decisions made on the basis of a characterisation of Dad and the family, which doesn’t seem to stack up with the evidence. i.e. – she can remain / have contact, they are stable and protective and will get in touch if there are problems – but they don’t necessarily see problems, and there is all sorts of other instability (drug overdoses,[...] etc.). Long-term involvement with perpetrator (eventually), but only on-off involvement with victim. Youth justice then needing to try to look out for the victim as well.

Coding really hard – hard for it not to be flat, just descriptive rather than analytical, and then if analytical hard for it not to be judgmental. Eg, co-working with specialist service – just descriptive, and just something I think might be factor in decision making. Other examples – ‘describing’ perpetrator, parental relationship etc. I also seem to be struggling to code line-by-line, word-by-word. I get fed up, find it too

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tedious, and think I lose the meaning and context. Difficult to provide analytical code rather than just more or less repeating what was said. And what is the right analysis? Eg, discovering one day that she was living with them – becomes – being out of control of events. Is that right? Should it be families making decisions for themselves? Or something else? Also – really difficult to code with short, snappy titles. Easier to code when talking about the worker’s own experience rather than their reporting of events. It is difficult to code opinions – it is easier to code experiences and actions.

**OK** – Decisions seeming to be made by Children and Families social work (C+F) rather than youth justice (YJ) – some of them anyway. YJ don’t really understand some of the C+F decisions either. Families making their own decisions, events taking over, pressures from family for contact and reunification. Second time offence. Lack of support for victim connected to C+F dipping in and out, not having longer term view. Decisions being made just through passage of time – eg contact developing rather than being clear about risk formulation and certain tasks being achieved – just doing what is asked. No sense of looking at sibling relationship. Making a fuss. Taking it seriously. Characterisations of family as stable, cooperative, trusted to say if there are problems (but doesn’t seem to accord with the ‘facts’). So much uncertainty over events, history, impact.

## **Appendix 12: Memo - Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse**

Social workers have a number of different labels they attach to sibling sexual behaviour. They may describe it as inappropriate, experimental, problematic or abusive. These terms seem to run in order of seriousness, but it is not clear what the criteria are for judging seriousness. It possibly connects to the degree of harmfulness, although harm is not explored. Social workers may also talk about sexualised behaviour. It is not just sexual behaviour, it is sexualised: the child has been corrupted in some way to behave in a way not in keeping with their age, not in keeping with being a child?

The social workers seem generally to want to avoid labelling the behaviour as abuse altogether, but sometimes resist the label under some circumstances but not others, or not resist labelling the behaviour as abuse.

Social workers mostly resist labelling the behaviour as abuse when talking about the perpetrator child, but not when discussing the victim, the victim's needs, the impact on the victim, the safety of the victim (e.g. Interviews 1, 6, 8). Also, interviews 13 and 9, allocated to victim only, talk about the behaviour as abuse.

Is it related to type of behaviour? Interview 8 resists label of abuse despite behaviour involving rape, but later says perhaps it was abuse. Needed to get to know the family – so linked to relationships?

Interviews 11 and 14 are clear in trying to avoid using stigmatising language – they resist labelling the behaviour as abuse because they don't want to label the child as an abuser.

Who does not resist labelling the behaviour as abuse when referring to the perpetrator? Interview 12 – resisted the label at first but then described the boy as cold, detached, unremorseful, psychopath. Interview 15 had previous suspicions about the boy's behaviour, previous investigations carried out. Therefore the kinds of children who would abuse?

But Interviews 10, 17, 19 also label the behaviour as abuse. They do not experience the children as cold, unremorseful. Quite the opposite for 10 – she really liked the boy, and was clear that the behaviour was abuse because of power difference, lack of consent. BUT, she also saw the behaviour as abuse of the parent rather than the child. Still not abuse of the child. These social workers seem to separate the behaviour from the characterisation of the child. Any commonalities between them? No similarities of age, professional setting, experience...

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Interview 14 suggests different people might use different terms to describe the same behaviour: Managers, people a bit further removed from the case? Connects with interviews 13 and 9 – allocated only to victim.

So there are dimensions of resisting, not managing to sustain resistance, not resisting, resisting and not in different contexts. There seem to be factors around whether talking about the perpetrator or victim, whether allocated to perpetrator or victim, whether more removed from the case (from the perpetrator?), and whether the perpetrator is the kind of child who would abuse. So labelling behaviour to some extent connected to character of child?

## Appendix 13: Memo - Engaging

The social workers often talk about the parents engaging with services. What does this mean?

There seems to be a distinction between initial engagement and long-term engagement. Initially parents need to report the behaviour, be willing to accept support (Interview 8) but also believe it happened (Interview 16).

Longer-term the parents need to engage more deeply with services, to be willing to address and change some of their parenting and underlying issues. (14, 8)

So short and long-term, superficial and deep engagement.

Is deep engagement always necessary long-term? 16 just had to believe it happened – under pressure due to girl about to come home. And Interview 1, parents putting pressure on – they didn’t complete the work asked of them, but they were seen to engage really well; they had really good intentions even if they didn’t always manage it. 18, parent did complete all of the work asked – didn’t seem to be any pressures of resources there. These were about reunification, though. What about staying at home? 14 - they didn’t always engage and this was when there was most threat to remove the children; then they did engage and were seen to try to address their issues – had good intentions. Engagement and good intentions seemed to be more influential than the repeated sexual behaviour. 8 was seen as not willing to engage, though, not willing to address deep issues and child removed following further incident.

So differences in terms of whether the children were returning home or remaining at home. Differences around pressure or no pressure; and something about intentions and engagement. The intentions of the parents are being judged rather than their ability to protect. Why is engagement so important? Why not ability to protect? This is hardly mentioned. Does engagement indicate intention? Does intention indicate protective, intending to protect more important than managing to protect?

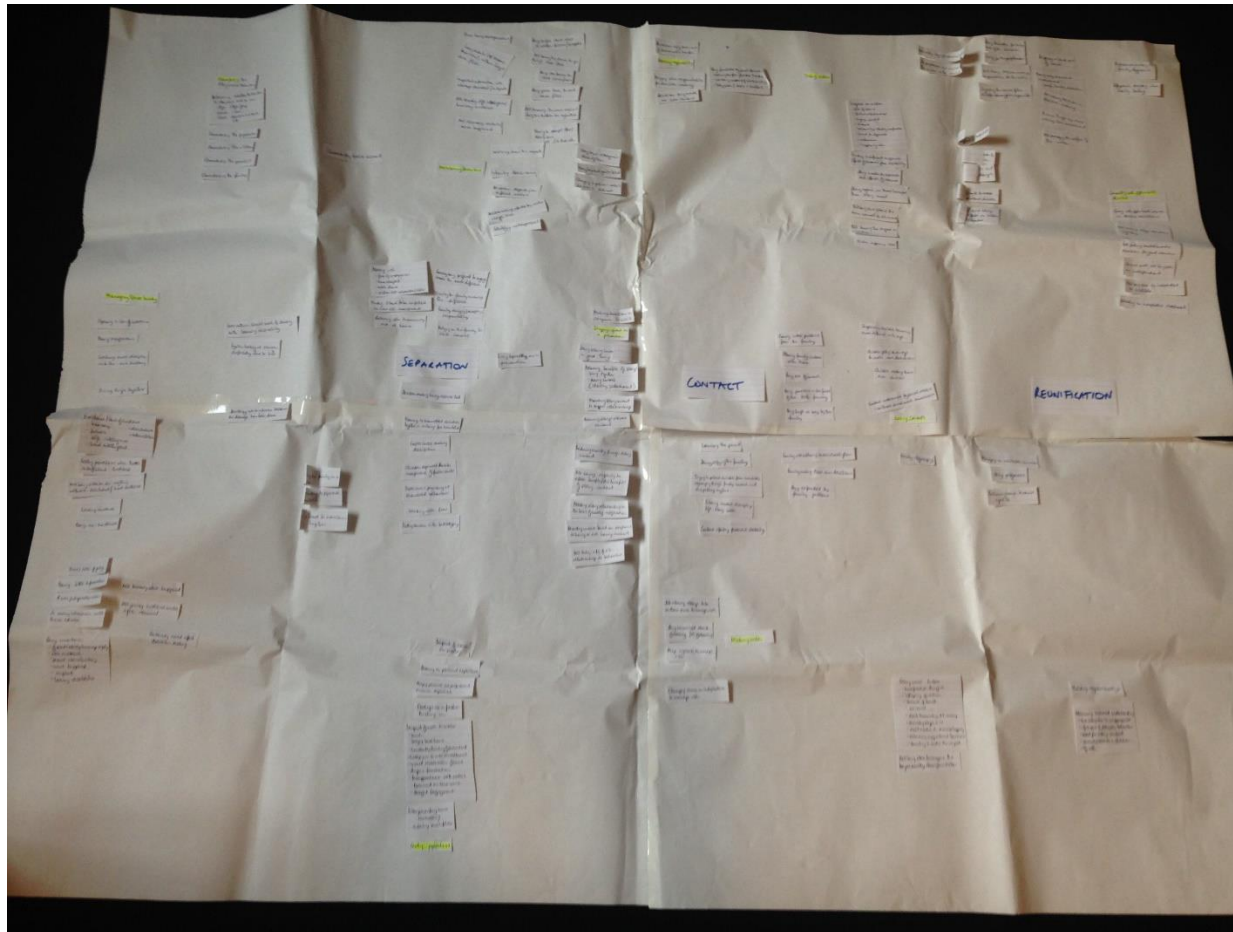
16 says – dad reported so he was being protective. Engagement perhaps taken as proxy for being protective. Does lack of engagement undermine view of being well-intentioned? Interview 1 questions ability to protect even though they were engaging – well-intentioned but not necessarily protective.

It's pretty confusing all this stuff. Capacity certainly seems to be secondary to intention. Need to think some more.





## Appendix 14: First mapping exercise





## Appendix 15: Memo - Strategies for managing uncertainty and complexity

**Characterising** – characterising the family, the sexual behaviour, the perpetrator, the parent(s) as a way to guide and steer decision making. Making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. Do we trust this family? Is this perpetrator a child, vulnerable, honest? Is the victim credible? Characterising seems to be about providing a summary description of something, but carrying some kind of moral value or judgement. The characterisation might not fit with the detailed description the social worker gives. Decisions made on the basis of these moral judgements, these characterisations? It simplifies the complexity of the situation.

**Maintaining the status quo** – inheriting decisions, not having all the info in the case files, losing info in large case files, being too busy to read case files – so going just with what is in place already. Challenging previous decisions being delicate, arrangements being long-established, believing that sibling contact is inherently a good thing, not wanting to separate families, but perhaps not throwing them back together if already separate? Perhaps linked to characterising – the family as good, trustworthy etc. Perhaps characterising is not a separate response to uncertainty... but is a factor in whether status quo is maintained or not. But we don’t know the behaviour is abusive, what the risks are, so we make these moral and value judgements – is that what it is?

**Making rules** – to try to manage the possible behaviours if contact / living together is the scenario. These rules seem to be about risk of recurrence, grooming, rather than the quality of the relationship as such – no relationship re-building work seems to be done. Is this about managing anxiety rather than / as well as uncertainty?

**Stopping contact as a precaution** – so we know the behaviour has happened, but don’t know the risks or the impact, so we stop it until we can be clearer just to be on the safe side. We’re concerned. Alarm bells are ringing. OR, assuming benefits of siblings living together, having contact, assuming sibling will want contact, deciding contact on the basis of trial and error. Allow it to happen and see if it works.

**Taking sides** – we don’t know what to do or the impact on the victim. Naturally trying to save the victim, but due to dipping in and out of cases they’re not always represented. We’re torn between the needs of the victim and perpetrator. We have a conflict of interests as the perpetrator is also a child. The perpetrator is a child but the victim is the child. We advocate for the child for whom we’re responsible. What if both? Perhaps then we side with the mother – tears and snotters – or we call in a specialist as we’re not seen as independent, we mirror family dynamics, or divide as professionals. I could bring in stuff about personal impact here – e.g. not being able to face victim or the feelings as a father would kick in; seeing sexual abuse as the worst thing imaginable, so not wanting to imagine it. Could sibling incest taboo come in here too?

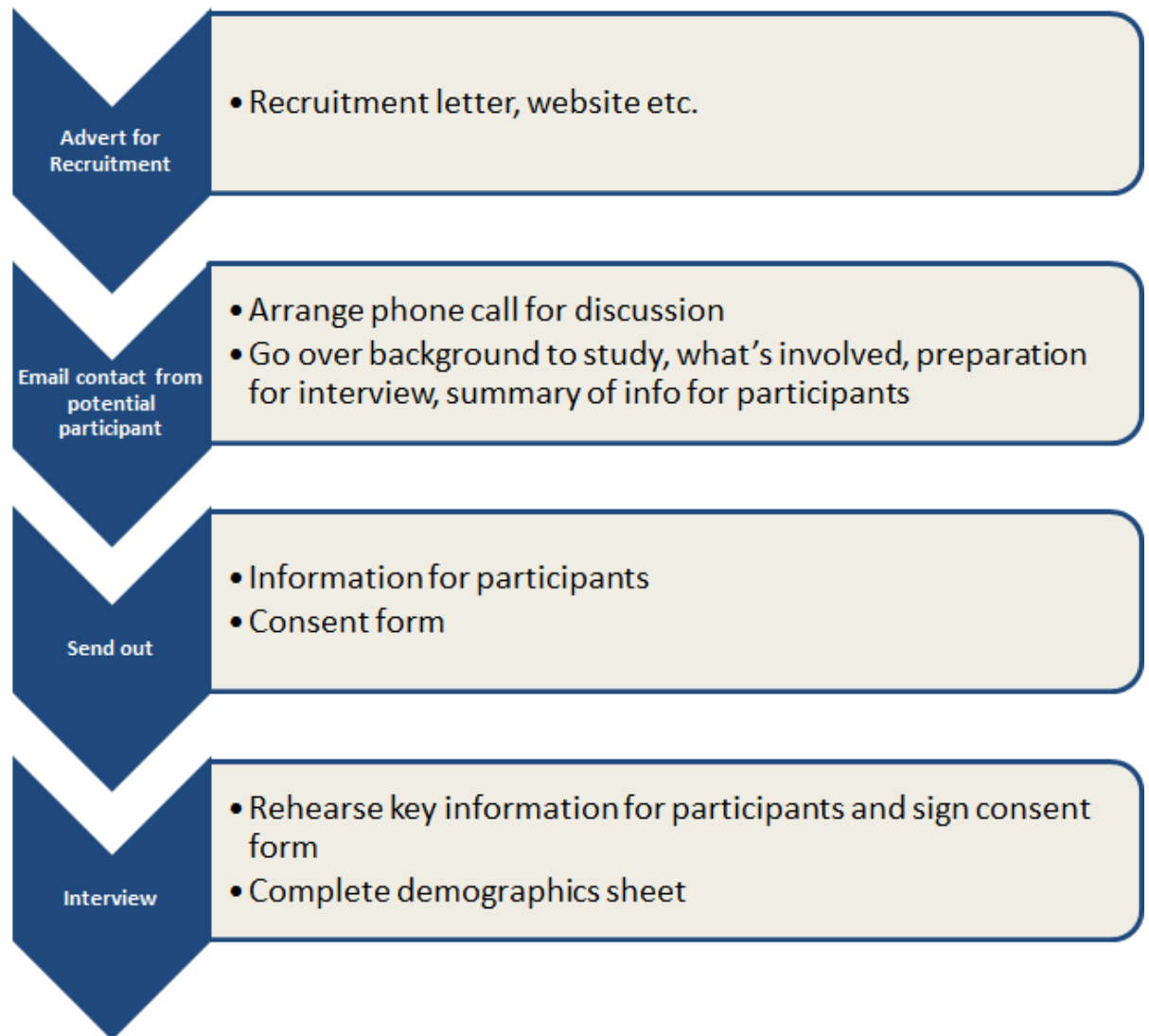
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**Absolving responsibility** – I think this might be too strong a term. But something about consulting with specialists, saying it’s children’s hearings or LAC reviews that make the decisions, holding regular meetings and making the decision making collective, deferring to the family? Other people make the decisions.

**Losing control** – Feeling powerless in the face of the birth family, coming under pressure from the family, being pragmatic, managing an inevitable reunion, being undermined by social media, family regrouping in the background. Family not adhering to social work plan. Children making their own decisions.

What is different in all of this from other social work? Perhaps the fact that we’re dealing with sibling relationships and they’re not very well understood. Assuming they’re beneficial perhaps, or at least contact being the default position, not having capacity or knowledge to assess contact other than by the experience of having it or not having it. The same assumption isn’t made for adults – this is very clear in these interviews as well – stuff like, well obviously dad can’t have contact (Interview 3) – but these assumptions not made necessarily of mothers – perhaps some similar issues here? Perhaps also that we need to consider the perpetrator at all as a child – balancing the rights and needs of both children, therefore being torn. Not sure. Work on it.

## Appendix 16: Recruitment process





## Appendix 17: Information for participants

### Funding and purpose

This study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is being undertaken as a piece of doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh.

The study is seeking to find out how social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and what influences social workers when making decisions in cases where sibling sexual behaviour has taken place: What considerations are brought to bear, and what social workers’ experiences are of making these decisions.

### What will be involved in participating

You would be interviewed by the researcher, Peter Yates, in order to help you talk through the process of a case you have been involved in, tracing the decisions that were made along the way, and reflecting on the kinds of issues which have influenced these decisions. This interview is likely to last approximately an hour and a half and will take place sometime between now and July 2013 at a time and location to suit you. The interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. Peter will keep in touch with you after the interview and will let you know how the study is progressing.

If you have the time prior to the interview it would be most helpful if you could prepare for it by reading back through some of the case files in order to refresh your memory on what happened. Ideally it would be useful if you could also provide Peter with some anonymised background information about the case in order to help him become familiar with some of the basic details and the course of events. This will help to structure the interview in a clear and chronological way. It is not essential to do so, and you can discuss with Peter in advance what you would feel able to provide.

### Benefits

The research should provide you with a useful opportunity to reflect on what can be very difficult work. It is very unlikely that reflecting in this way will raise any difficult issues for you personally. By participating in the research you will help to develop our understanding of social worker decision making generally, and in the field of sibling sexual behaviour particularly. You will be provided with a summary of the key findings from the study once the final thesis has been approved, and it is also intended for the findings to be published through articles in academic and social work journals, as well as being discussed at workshops and conferences. This should help to promote good practice in this field and therefore be of benefit to future social workers and service users.

### Confidentiality and anonymity

It will be very important throughout the study to maintain the anonymity of both participants and service users. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the interviews to protect the anonymity of the service users.

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In writing up the study no identifying information about service users (such as names, places, and unusual case details) will be included. Comments made by participants will not be attributable to individuals or to their agencies.

Only in the unlikely event of your making a specific disclosure about ongoing child abuse which you are not going to address will any identifying information be shared with a third party. In this event Peter will work with you to share the information with your line manager.

The transcripts of the interviews will be stored in a safe and confidential location. It is a requirement of the funding for this research that the interview transcripts be stored in the UK data archive for potential access by other researchers. Please be reassured that transcripts will be fully anonymised prior to being archived by removing identifying information and editing, disguising or removing unusual case details. If you wish, you can be provided with a transcript of your interview to check that anonymity has been fully maintained prior to archiving. The audio recordings of the interviews will be destroyed once the PhD has been completed.

### Consent

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to three months after the interview has taken place. You do not have to give any reason, and any transcripts and recording of the interview will be destroyed.

### Complaints

If you wish to make a complaint about anything to do with the research, it would be most helpful if you could talk this through with me first to see if we can resolve your concerns. Otherwise please contact the supervisor of the research, Janice McGhee, at [Janice.McGhee@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Janice.McGhee@ed.ac.uk)

### Brief biographical information about the researcher

Peter is currently studying for a PhD at the University of Edinburgh. He is a qualified social worker having had several years’ experience in a local authority children and families area team, followed by four years working in a specialist agency for children who display harmful sexual behaviour. Much of his work there involved cases of sexual behaviour between siblings, and is where he developed a particular interest in decision making in this area. He moved on to teach social work at Edinburgh University before committing to PhD research full-time. Previous research has included a practice-based study of risk assessment considerations regarding victim selection in cases involving the sexual abuse by boys of other children.

You can get in touch with Peter by e-mail at [peter.yates@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peter.yates@ed.ac.uk) or by phoning 0131 651 1585.

Peter Yates  
Social Work PhD Student  
University of Edinburgh  
25<sup>th</sup> September 2012



## Appendix 18: Consent form

*If you consent to being interviewed and to any data gathered being processed as outlined below, please print and sign your name and date the form in the spaces provided. Thank you.*

This project: “Social Worker decision making in cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings” is being conducted by Peter Yates (PhD Student) at the University of Edinburgh. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Peter Yates can be contacted by e-mail at [peter.yates@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peter.yates@ed.ac.uk) or by telephone on 0131 651 1585.

All data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act, and will be stored securely.

Your personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.

Interviews will be digitally recorded by Peter Yates and transcribed either by Peter Yates or an independent transcriber, who has signed a confidentiality agreement with him.

Data collected may be processed manually and with the aid of computer software.

Copies of interview transcripts will be anonymised, whereby any identifying information is either edited or removed, prior to being offered to the UK Data Archive.

A copy of your interview transcript will be provided to you, free of charge, on request.

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs but will not be attributable to me as an individual or to my organisation.

I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the UK Data Archive.

I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

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I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time prior to or during the interview, and up to three months after the interview has taken place. In this event, any transcripts and recording of the interview will be destroyed.

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Peter Yates.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information for participants, dated 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012 and in this consent form.

I agree to take part in the research.

Please print your name:

Signature:

Date:

## **Appendix 19: Schedule of questions for policy informants**

What is your job title and position within the authority?

How many cases involving concerns about children with harmful sexual behaviour have been referred to your authority over the last twelve months? If this information is not available, this would also be helpful to know.

How many cases involving concerns about sibling sexual behaviour have been referred to your authority over the last 12 months? If this information is not available, this would also be helpful to know.

What local and national policies would you expect to inform social workers working with cases of sibling sexual behaviour?

Is there any local policy documentation, and if so, would it be possible for me to have a copy?

In cases where there are decisions to be made about separation of siblings, contact between siblings, and reunification of families following sibling sexual abuse, where would you expect social workers to turn to for guidance?

Do you have any specific local policy guidance on these issues? If so, would it be possible for me to have a copy?

Are there any other more general comments that you would like to make about this area of work?

Thank you very much for all your time and trouble in responding to these questions.



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